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Towards the concerted management of whale-watching in the Mediterranean Sea

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Whale-watching is rapidly developing in the Mediterranean Sea. The objective of this economic activity is laudable: allowing the public to go out at sea to observe marine mammals, and whales in particular. However, it runs the risk of becoming unsustainable when a number of rules to respect these animals are not taken into account. According to its management plan, the Pelagos agreement jointly launched with ACCOBAMS a concerted management program in order to regulate this activity deemed important for the conservation of cetaceans.

In the French part of the Mediterranean, an initial study carried out in 2005 allowed to identify whale-watching operators, the socio-economic value of this activity, its risks (closing on whales for example), its spatial distribution, and to set up a standardised monitoring protocol.

An extensive consultation work was then carried out in the 3 member states of the Pelagos agreement, in collaboration with ACCOBAMS aiming at spreading experience to the whole area of the Agreement. This work led to a project of a quality label respectful of the environment, developed jointly by the environmental managers, NGOs and the whale-watching operators. This shared governance appeared to be the best way to ensure and enhance a high level of involvement from the operators, emphasizing a co-responsible approach. To be certified the whale-watching companies have to commit to attend a mandatory training session, to follow strict rules to approach cetaceans, to include nature-watch in their services and to contribute to research programmes. Wider involvements such as waste sorting on board and reduction of fossil fuel dependency are also considered. Finally, this approach commits the operators to undertake public awareness with passengers (the activity therefore contributes to communicating the pride felt by the local community when they know “their” cetaceans and protecting them).

In 2012, the first training session took place in France; the certification will be established in the Pelagos Sanctuary, and then likely applied throughout the area covered by the ACCOBAMS. Following this dynamic, ACCOBAMS Permanent Secretary launched two feasibility studies (in Morocco and Tunisia) to implement sustainable whale-watching activities thanks to the support of the French Ministry of Ecology. These two studies follow the logic of ecotourism development (nature-watch) which in this case is essentially marine-based. In particular it involves fishermen who appear to be in favour of developing new activities that can complement their usual work such as *pescatourism*. An interesting next step could be to promote and try out the label via a number of pilot sites of the MedPAN network of MPAs.