

Self-regulation of whale-watching practices: A case study.

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Cite as:

Laflamme Josée (2020), Self-regulation of whale-watching practices: A case study. .
Proceedings of the European Marketing Academy, 49th, (64271)

Paper from the 49th Annual EMAC Conference, Budapest, May 26-29, 2020.



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Abstract

The popularity of offshore observing activities and the St. Lawrence River development strategies offer businesses in the marine sector an opportunity to develop their activities. Beyond the economic value, consideration of the social and environmental dimensions must not be neglected. In this regard, the Saguenay-St.Lawrence Marine Park (SSLMP), with the Eco-Whale Alliance, represents a model of collaboration between stakeholders that aims to promote and implement sustainable development.

This article explores the motivations of the SSLMP stakeholders to set up a self-regulation tool that promotes sustainable development. It then listed the impacts on marine practices as a result of joining the alliance. In order to achieve these two objectives, a case study was conducted with four cruisers. The results highlight the motivations of cruise lines to create self-regulation standards and also the impacts that the implementation of these standards can have on the practices of the seafarers.

Keywords: Sustainable tourism, Marine tourism, self-regulation

Track: Tourism marketing

1. Introduction

Quebec attracted 34.1 million tourists in 2017 (Tourism Quebec, 2019). Despite the growth of the industry on the international scene, tourist traffic in Quebec has been declining overall since the early 2000s. This situation in Quebec tourism industry has led it to differentiate itself from the competition through distinct and attractive products. In this regard, the Government of Quebec, through its tourism development strategy, is focusing on upgrading the Saint Lawrence River as an avenue to become an original destination. Enhancing ocean observing activities, including whale cruises, is part of this strategy and is a cornerstone of industry development (Tourism Quebec, 2019).

The popularity of ocean observing activities, combined with the St. Lawrence River development strategies, offers companies in the marine sector an opportunity to develop their offshore observation activities. Beyond the economic value that this deployment can allow, consideration of the social and environmental dimensions should not be neglected, hence the relevance of promoting responsible development practices. In this regard, the Saguenay-St. Lawrence Marine Park (SSLMP), with the establishment of the Eco-Whale Alliance, represents a model of collaboration between different actors whose aim is to enhance and implement sustainable development practices.

The objectives of this research are twofold. First, it wants to identify the motivations of the actors to participate in the creation and implementation of the Alliance. Second, it aims to assess the impact on the organization's offshore practices following its membership in the alliance. In order to meet these two objectives, a case study was conducted with four cruisers who participated in the creation and implementation of the Eco-Whale Alliance.

2. Maritime Tourism and Sustainable Development

2.1 Maritime tourism

In its broadest perspective, tourism involves moving to an area outside the daily environment of an individual, carried out for a personal or unpaid professional purpose for a maximum period of one year (Delisle & Jolin, 2007; Guillon, 2004). More specifically, maritime tourism includes activities carried out in coastal areas or offshore and infrastructure related to the maritime environment. Its industry is a significant driver of economic development (Brieu, Durif and Prim-Allaz, 2011; Delisle & Jolin, 2007). Despite this, marine tourism remains dependent on natural resources.

Alongside this need to preserve the resource, the marine tourism industry is responsible for many environmental impacts (Brieu et al., 2011; Delisle & Jolin, 2007). In this context, where the maritime tourism industry is dependent on the resource, responsible development practices are needed in order to preserve the resource.

2.2 Sustainable tourism

Tourism development is a pathway to regional economic prosperity by providing income from vacationers. However, to this economic contribution is added the consideration of social and environmental impacts especially for the host community (Buckley, 2012; Padin, 2012; Spenceley, 2005, Brunt & Courtney, 1999; Haralambopoulos & Pizam, 1996), the government (Wong, 1996) and local businesses (Bramwell & Lane, 2013; Buckley, 2012; Haukeland, 2011; Spenceley 2005). Concern for these impacts on the actors inevitably leads to a sustainable conception of tourism development.

In this context, sustainable tourism is economically viable and does not affect the resources on which its future activities depend, namely the physical and social environment (Swarbrooke, 1999). Despite the absence of a consensual definition in the literature (Johnston & Tyrrell, 2005), the proposed definitions most often refer to sustainable development in a tourism context (William & Ponsford, 2009; Johnston & Tyrrell, 2005; Liu 2003), which underpins viable long-term practices in addition to reducing the negative impacts of development. In order to preserve the natural environment, the resources and the quality of life of its population, sustainable tourism tries to minimize the tensions that can emerge from interactions between tourists, the environment and host communities (Liu, 2003).

The literature identifies three objectives that guide sustainable tourism. First, it must meet the needs of the host population by improving its standards of living. Second, sustainable tourism responds to tourism demand for a specific geographical area and, finally, it helps to preserve the natural environment of the environment while meeting the first two objectives (François-Lecompte & Prim-Allaz, 2011; Liu, 2003). The SSLMP meets these objectives. Its development, dependent on the resource, requires a sustainable approach, with respect to the ocean observing activities. It is a model in the maritime tourism industry.

2.3 Saguenay and St. Lawrence Marine Park and Eco-Whale Alliance

The SSLMP was created in June 1998 following pressure from local communities concerned about the health of the marine environment. Today, the mission of SSLMP is to promote the use of the park for educational, scientific and recreational purposes, while

promoting a quality visitor experience (Foisy & Désaulniers, 2011). Its management is participative. Local communities, private businesses and organizations have the opportunity to work with government authorities on park management activities. In this sense, the park, created for nearly 20 years, still meets the requirements of the local communities. The Alliance aims to ensure responsible whale watching practices and sustainable development (Eco-Whale Alliance, 2019).

The Eco-Whale Alliance comes from an agreement bringing together the business community, the government and the scientific community. Its objectives are: 1) to raise public awareness about conservation, 2) to limit the impacts of offshore observing activities. whales, 3) monitor the resource and the effectiveness of management measures, 4) follow responsible practices and 5) work in a spirit of cooperation (Eco-Whale Alliance, 2019).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research objectives

In the current context of promoting sustainable development, Quebec companies are trying to adopt responsible behavior. The whale-watching industry in the SSLMP is part of this process. It thus becomes justifiable to wonder about the reasons inciting companies to put forward these innovative ways of doing things and to see how they adapt to them on a daily basis. Based on these findings, the present study allows 1) to identify the motivations of companies to participate in the creation and implementation of the alliance, and 2) to assess the impacts on their practices at sea as a result of joining the alliance. The following section outlines the methodology for achieving these two objectives.

3.2 Methodological approach

By its exploratory nature, the present research leads to the adoption of a qualitative methodological approach. The selection of companies was made among the six enterprises who contributed to the establishment of the Eco-Whale Alliance. To carry out this case study, it was necessary to target organizations of different size in order to obtain representativeness of actors concerned. To meet both research objectives, semi-directed interviews were conducted with stakeholders from the targeted companies. The selection of these was made on a voluntary basis and three groups were finally represented during these interviews: captains, naturalists and executives. As mentioned earlier, this was necessary to be able to evaluate the motivations of various groups of participants to get involved in the development of the

alliance, but also to identify the impacts in their daily work. However, in order to preserve the anonymity of the respondents, the respective number of each group will not be revealed. The interviews were conducted in SSLMP during summer 2018. The duration of each interview ranged from forty to fifty-five minutes. Each of these was recorded and then transcribed in *verbatim* before being analyzed.

4. Results

As a result of the interviews conducted, some observations emerge concerning, on one hand, motivations of the companies to participate in creation of the Eco-Whale Alliance and, on the other hand, the impacts of their membership of the alliance in their daily practices.

4.1 Motivators underlying creation of the Eco-Whale Alliance

The motivational factors that led the members of the cruise lines under study to contribute to creation of the Alliance can be grouped under four main themes: importance of preserving the resource, consultation, improvement of his image and collaboration.

- An industry dependent on the resource

A determining motivation in creation of the Eco-Whale Alliance is to foresee the possibility of actions to maximize the protection of the resource. Members of all the organizations are fully aware that the sustainability of whale-watching activities in the SSLMP is dependent on preservation of marine species. The development of the industry can only be efficient if responsible practices are deployed. A captain mentions that various issues related to whale-watching activities challenge all stakeholders in the company. They are inclined to fully engage in a process leading to better preservation of resources.

- Partnership and consultation

The second motivation identified in the semi-structured interviews is the desire to bring together all the stakeholders within the marine park to establish a consensus on working methods. The results obtained clearly show the interest of stakeholders to take an active part in the development of the Eco-Whale Alliance. The members took part in the various round tables preceding the setting up of the alliance. A captain mentions about the various meetings preceding the creation of the alliance that: "it is a way to regroup everyone concerned with the objective of building an ideal model".

- Image

For the management of the companies, creation of Eco-Whale Alliance will improve the image of maritime tourism industry which has been tarnished by behavior (for example, the "hunt" for whale watching) of some cruisers. A naturalist explains that frustration at sea was part of everyday life (before creation of the Eco-Whale Alliance). Another actor mentions that the Eco-Whale Alliance will consolidate the position of the SSLMP. "Respect for the species will help to differentiate the product offered in the marine park from other products and promote a positive image of the industry". He also stated that his involvement in the development of the Eco-Whale Alliance was motivated by the idea of improving image associated with his profession, and not only the industry in general.

- Collaboration

The behavioral management at sea is an important aspect for all the respondents. Indeed, competition to obtain the best place to observe marine mammals became irritating for cruisers. A captain mentions: "When we find ourselves on an observation area, we can be six boats, which makes us want to compete." The willingness to counter these rivalries on the observation sites, by adopting more civilized and courteous behaviors between members, was clearly expressed during the interviews.

4.2 Impacts on daily practices at sea as a result of joining the alliance

The Eco-Whale Alliance membership of the cruise lines studied has led to some behavioral changes. To this end, the topics covered in the interviews are abundant, but can be grouped into four broad categories.

- Communication

The improvement of communication seems to be a significant consequence for the participants. Joining the Alliance increases the interactions between the different signatories, but also between captains and active research teams in the SSLMP. Five stakeholders interviewed noted that since joining the Eco-Whale Alliance, radio communication between members of the industry has considerably increased. Exchanges concerning the position of whales no longer seem to be a secret to keep to satisfy exclusively its own customers.

- More responsible interpretation activities

Nine participants state that membership of the Eco-Whale Alliance entails more adequate and resource-friendly interpretive activities. Indeed, the guide of eco-responsible practices for captains and naturalists constitutes a fundamental tool to the interpretation of the environment. For all respondents, this guide proposed by the alliance represents a relevant working tool guiding whale-watching activities. Interpretation activities are tinged with

respect for species and the environment. A naturalist mentioned that as a member of the Eco-Whale Alliance, access to tools such as the guide of eco-responsible practices facilitates the daily work. Naturalists, government institutions and captains work together to continue to raise awareness of resource management issues. As long as the marine park is a protected place, the wish of the stakeholders is to highlight it by the interpretation activities granted on board the boats as well as on the terrestrial observation sites.

- Self-management process conducive to responsible behavior

Although Parks Canada and the SSLMP have regulations in place, this code of conduct is perceived by cruise lines as an external hierarchical imposition. With the Eco-Whale Alliance, managers, captains and naturalists feel an ethical duty towards the conservation of physical and human environment. The feeling of being concerned by the issues related to whale-watching activities creates, among the members interviewed, a tendency to engage in a continuous process of consultation. The guide of good practices is perceived by the captains and naturalists interviewed as a means to self-discipline voluntarily and not to be sanctioned by Parks Canada in the event of a breach of the by-law. This spirit makes the whale-watching activities more enjoyable for both industry and park visitors.

- Clientele more aware

By joining the Eco-Whale Alliance, the various actors have agreed to work in the same direction with respect to customer requests. The latter obviously want to see whales during their sea excursion. However, participants mentioned that they feel less pressure. This can be explained by the simple fact of adhering to the Eco-Whale Alliance's philosophy of preserving the resource first and foremost, regardless of the wishes of the clientele. In addition, as naturalists point out, the proposed cruises are no longer only attractive to whales and now rely on many other resources of nature. This diversity makes it possible to ensure their complete satisfaction. Clients are therefore becoming more aware that the sight of a marine mammal during a sea excursion is a privilege. A captain mentions that vacationers are more aware of the protection of species.

5. Discussion

Sustainable tourism links the tourism industry's contribution to the economy, the society and the judicious use of resources and respect for the environment. With this in mind, there are many reasons to register for a company, in a philosophy that will allow it to improve its practices, but also those of an entire community.

The involvement of cruise lines in the development process of the Eco-Whale Alliance helped to highlight real problems encountered on the waters of the SSLMP during whale-watching activities. These companies were able to express themselves on the difficulties related to competitiveness between cruisers during whale-watching, often making them uncomfortable with customers who are increasingly aware of environmental issues. With the years spent on the waters of the marine park, naturalists observe changes in mentalities of visitors. With a clientele more sensitive to environmental protection issues, the industry had to follow the "green" trend. The establishment of the Eco-Whale Alliance in the SSLMP has, in this sense, contributed to giving the ecotourism whaler its credentials.

It is important to note that strength of the Eco-Whale Alliance lies in its collaborative and consensual form. Indeed, the cruisers and SSLMP administrators are no longer the only players in tourism development. This alliance applies to all sailors, captains, naturalists, kayakers and boaters. A participatory management approach between the stakeholders has made it possible to develop and sign the Eco-Whale Alliance commitment. This alliance thus becomes the vehicle for maintaining good practices.

Gradually, following the accession of cruise lines to the Eco-Whale Alliance, competitive behavior changed. A code of ethics has been adopted by all members of the alliance to standardize working methods on water, encourage teamwork and thereby limit disturbance to marine mammals. This alliance encourages communication, civility and respect between cruise lines and other users.

The impacts of a company joining the Eco-Whale Alliance contributes to improving the image of whale cruise industry in the SSLMP. Tourism marketing increasingly integrates the concepts of environmental protection and economic vitality into those of economic value (François-Lecompte & Prim-Allaz, 2011; Delisle & Jolin, 2007). Beyond the image of the industry, the customer's perception of the tourist destination must not be different from reality. The SSLMP's marketing communication regarding its whale-watching activities must promote an honest offer, consistent with reality (François-Lecompte & Prim-Allaz, 2011). This honesty has an impact on the satisfaction of tourists.

6. Conclusion and limitations of the study

This study presents an original contribution to the limited literature on sustainable maritime tourism. Results indicate, on the one hand, that cruise ship operators who were involved in the Eco-Whale Alliance development have done so for the preservation of

resource, consultation in industry, improved image and at-sea collaboration in observation practices. What's more, captains and naturalists of these organizations have also improved their practices at sea on whale-watching cruises. They also point to better communication between cruise lines, but also with the actors of the SSLMP (captains, naturalists or research teams). The more responsible aspect of interpreting activities is also raised during the interviews. Furthermore, participants also consider that the self-management model engendered by the Eco-Whale Alliance is conducive to responsible behavior at sea of the cruise lines in the SSLMP. At the same time, they point out that customers are increasingly aware of the importance of sustainability of marine mammals in the SSLMP.

Despite its important contribution, this study has certain limitations. First of all, through its methodological approach, the case study only allowed to consider motivations and impacts of some companies in the SSLMP. In addition, the organizations studied are among those involved in the development of the Eco-Whale Alliance. They are therefore companies which already have certain values inclined to sustainable practices. It would have been interesting to see whether the impacts are as significant for a cruise line who joined the Eco-Whale Alliance without having contributed to its development.

As future research, it would be particularly relevant to note whether the Eco-Whale Alliance membership rate is increasing year after year. Does collaboration among members encourage non-members to join? In addition, the evaluation, in a long-term perspective, of the impacts on whale-watching practices would be interesting to document further.

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