

# Codes of conduct: managing interactions between visitors and wildlife in natural areas

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## *Wildlife tourism in Iceland*

Visitors to Iceland come in search of unique nature-based experiences. Known as a land of geysers, volcanoes and glaciers, Iceland is also home to interesting species of wildlife that add significantly to the attraction of the country. In 2013 tourism for the first time became the largest export sector in Iceland, taking over from fisheries and aluminum (Óladóttir 2014). In the same year, an Icelandic Tourist Board report (Óladóttir 2013) predicted the country would receive one million visitors during 2020. Popular media, however, frequently claim that this number may be reached in 2014. This rapid increase in visitation is coupled with concerns about sustainability of the industry and its products, and how the associated issues and challenges should be managed successfully.

It is well documented that tourism can negatively impact wild animals (e.g., Green and Giese 2004); nevertheless, the phenomenal growth in wildlife tourism in Iceland has developed without comprehensive policies or guidelines. Managing tourism to ensure positive visitor experiences, while also minimising disturbance to wildlife, is a field of on-going interest. Codes of conduct, designed as guidelines to govern tourist activities in wildlife habitat, are often developed in reaction to a particular local situation rather than as a result of long term strategic planning. Compared to government based regulations and legislations, more informal codes can be relatively quick to implement. The introduction of a code of conduct can have positive effects on wildlife (e.g. Wray et al. 2010). However, codes of conduct seldom eradicate negative impacts on wild animals (Quiros 2007; Duprey et al. 2008) partly because important factors that should be considered when preparing such codes are rarely elaborated.

## *Codes of conduct and ethical principles*

In May 2014 The Wild North project released a series of codes of conduct designed to guide visitor interactions with whales, seals, birds and foxes across several Nordic countries, including Iceland. This paper examines these codes, through a case study of seal watching on the Vatnsnes peninsula in northern Iceland. The region supports a large population of harbour seals (*Phoca vitulina*), which haul out on skerries close to land, where they are readily observed by visitors to the region either on foot or by organized boat trips. This paper discusses the identified need for The Wild North codes of conduct, their history and anticipated implementation on the Vatnsnes peninsula. Based on a literature review and secondary data, we compare The Wild North codes with those used in other countries to gauge their strengths and weaknesses. Questioning the efficacy of codes of conduct, we ask: Are there better ways to manage wildlife tourism?

Searching for better ways, a set of ethical principles designed to facilitate a more ecocentric approach to managing the interactions between visitors and wildlife in natural areas is explored (Burns, Moore and Macbeth 2011). The principles encourage visitors to recognise the intrinsic value of wildlife and develop a sense of moral obligation and moral reasoning toward their wildlife

experience. The principles propose that management strategies work within a precautionary framework, acknowledge the interconnectedness between people and nature, and accept that wildlife belongs in nature. This requires managers to engage in a reflexive process with regard to their own ethical position to facilitate the practical application of an ecocentric approach.

### *Understanding and effectively utilizing codes of conduct*

The study revealed that codes of conduct are commonly developed and used as an idealized way to guide tourism related interactions with wildlife. However, little attention appears to have been given to assessing their effectiveness. Consequently, we argue the need for greater attention to monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of codes of conduct. Based on the ethical principles, we also suggest that codes of conduct with a more anthropocentric focus support the perception of wildlife as tourism objects; that is, for their use to people (an extrinsic, or instrumental value) which may not be the most sustainable way forward. In contrast, codes developed by those concerned primarily with protection of the animals tend toward discourse that may alienate the visitors and not encourage compliance behaviours.

Arguing that an interdisciplinary approach, incorporating expertise from both biologists and tourism specialists, is needed to research, develop and monitor codes (Granquist and Nilsson 2013), we propose how codes of conduct might look if they start from a perspective that promotes the intrinsic value of wildlife to visitors. Applying ecocentric ethical principles to codes of conduct enables us to translate current thinking in wildlife tourism to real world applications. Our goal is a framework for the development of codes of conduct that maximise the positive experience for visitors to natural areas and minimize their disturbance of the wildlife.

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