

Seal Watching in Iceland: Ethical Management Development

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Introduction

In Iceland, nature is the main attraction for foreign visitors, however, management plans for wildlife watching activities are lacking and the need to develop evidence-based management is pressing. Wildlife tourism managers are tasked with the demands of developing tourism management that meet the needs of the local community and visitors, while also minimizing negative impacts on wildlife. Visitors to Iceland believe that nature conservation should be improved and the majority of Icelanders (79%) feel that the negative effects of visitation on nature are too high (Óladóttir, 2017).

Involving local communities in wildlife tourism development plans is important in order to understand local needs and to gain public support. Community participation in developing sustainability indicators helps managers construct the concept of sustainability *for* the community. However, little is known about what sustainability means for local communities and further studies on hearing local voices, to understand how sustainability and responsibility in managing natural areas are perceived, are needed. Hearing local voices empowers community development, underlines the importance of local knowledge and culture, and enhances capacity.

The purpose of this conceptual paper is to address the need to manage human-wildlife interactions in tourism settings to ensure positive outcomes for all stakeholders: wildlife, local communities, and visitors. Seal watching in Iceland is used as a case study to develop a model for investigating theoretical and practical understandings of wildlife watching management, environmental ethics, and community development. It will describe the need for future management actions in Iceland for seal watching in particular, and wildlife watching more broadly, and make suggestions towards ethically responsible strategies.

Background

The demand for wildlife watching has increased in Iceland including visitor interest in seal watching. Seal watching activities revolve around the two breeding seal species in Iceland; harbour seals (*Phoca vitulin*) and grey seals (*Halichoerus grypus*). Seals are easily accessible to visitors in several areas, through land and boat based seal watching activities. Negative impacts due to anthropogenic disturbance, for example, due to visitor use, resulting in alteration of natural behaviour and changes in seal distribution have frequently been reported (Granquist and Sigurjonsdottir, 2014). Previous studies show that human impacts can be a serious threat to vulnerable seal populations. The current conservation status of both the Icelandic harbour and grey seal populations is critical (Granquist and Hauksson, 2016), further underlining the urgent need to developed effective management approaches to facilitate responsible seal watching in Iceland.

One of the greatest challenges of managing interactions between humans and wildlife is the complexity of the phenomenon. Researchers and managers are trained to focus on separate parts in order to explain something that should be examined holistically. Separating these parts can make understanding certain aspects more manageable, however, failing to see them in the context of a larger system does not fully represent wildlife watching as a phenomenon nor is it efficient in predicting problems. Seeing wildlife watching, and the consequences of management actions from a systems perspective gives managers the tools to better cope with a variety of challenges while making them more effective professionals in their field. It is impossible, not to mention unethical and irresponsible, to ignore the potential effects of environmental management actions on local communities and/or exclude the planning process from other stakeholder groups. As an example, exclusion and non-participation of stakeholders in marine management, either deliberate or not, are issues of power and inequality and leads to local distrust and resentment of management actions (Flannery, Healy and Luna, 2018).

Philosophical principles guide wildlife tourism management, whether purposefully or not, and anthropocentrism has largely dominated how management actions are devised. Burns et al. (2011) argue that management actions of wildlife tourism based in nature should focus on policies and strategies with an ecocentric value system rather than on visitor types which only serves to continue the human centred focus. We propose that an ecocentric paradigm entails interdisciplinary and inter-sectoral research and knowledge that builds management actions with the understanding that humans are not devoid of their environment and that human action has direct consequences to both community and natural livelihoods.

Methods

This paper investigates theoretical and practical understandings of wildlife watching management, environmental ethics, and community development to build a methodological foundation for addressing ethically responsible strategies. We use seal watching tourism in Iceland as a case study to identify the need for future management actions, which can ultimately devise a plan applicable for responsible seal watching in particular, as well as for wildlife watching activities for other areas in Iceland. This paper reports on our examination of management actions from a systems perspective—including interdisciplinary and inter-sectoral knowledge—and argue that managers can better facilitate understanding of the critical role wildlife has among other community capitals, making specific management actions more effective and ethical, and increasing the likelihood of community support. Community Capitals Framework (CCF), an example of a systems thinking approach that emphasises assets (Emery and Flora, 2006), will be used to explain the importance of wildlife tourism management actions by contextualizing wildlife as an asset of local communities.

Discussion

By contextualising wildlife watching management, environmental ethics, and community development in a complex system; and by drawing from interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary theoretical and practical understandings, this case study highlights several potential problems and conflicts that managers should be cognizant of. These include: 1) The potential for misconceptions due to the differing levels and understandings of what sustainable and responsibility means among researchers and stakeholders, 2) The potential challenges in addressing and moving from anthropocentric management practices towards ecocentrism agenda, and 3) The potential management issues that may arise between different types of visitors at wildlife areas such as biocentric vs egocentric.

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