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Whalewatching worth billions and booming--study

Agence France-Presse

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AGADIR-- Whalewatching revenue topped two billion dollars in 2009 and could easily grow by 10 percent annually over the next few years, according to a new study.

The first peer-reviewed assessment of whale tourism's global value boosts economic arguments that the marine mammals are worth more alive than dead, the researchers said.

Published this week, the study coincides with a decision Thursday by the 88-nation International Whaling Commission (IWC), meeting in Agadir, Morocco, to move forward with a "five year strategic plan" to explore both the economic benefits and ecological risks of whalewatching.

Some 13 million eco-tourists in 2009 paid to see the animals in their natural element, generating 2.1 billion dollars (1.7 billion euros) and employing 13,000 people across hundreds of coastal regions worldwide, the study found.

"We can have our whales and still benefit from them, without killing them," said co-author Rashid Sumaila, a researcher at the University of British Columbia.

Whale tourism has expanded steadily over the last two decades. Continuing at the same pace would add more than 400 million dollars and 5,700 jobs to the global economy each year, said the study, published in the Britain-based journal Marine Policy.

"Given our methods of calculation, this is a conservative estimate. The real figures are probably much higher," Sumaila said by phone.

At least half of this growth would benefit seaside communities in developing countries, especially in the Caribbean, Latin America and Africa, where many fisheries are in decline.

"It can be launched with little initial investment and carried out by local fishers who are already familiar with the area," the study noted.

Whaling countries have argued that watching whales and killing them are not necessarily incompatible when populations are robust and expanding.

Indeed, the study found that every year half-a-million people ply the coastal waters of whaling nations in the hope of glimpsing a humpback, orca or other whale if full breach.

But if attitudes continue to shift toward protection of the marine mammals, the researchers suggested, tourists may one day insist on observing them near countries that are not also engaged in slaughtering them for market.

An effort to bridge the gap between pro- and anti-whaling nations during the IWC's annual meeting, which ends Friday, collapsed earlier this week.

Despite a moratorium on commercial whaling that went into effect in 1986, Iceland, Japan and Norway use legal loopholes to hunt the marine mammals, harvesting more than 1,500 in the 2008-2009 season alone.

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