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Whale Watching: Travel industry takes species protection seriously

Zurich (ots) -

Whale watching is a growing trend. Millions of people put to sea in order to observe free-swimming whales and dolphins, with their numbers increasing each year. Although there is not yet a quality label for whale watching, a uniform evaluation of selected tour operators is now available thanks to a pilot project initiated by OceanCare, together with Kontiki Saga, Glur Reisen and Scandinavian Airlines.

Practically all countries bordering on the ocean offer whale watching trips. Ever increasing large numbers of travellers eagerly grab the opportunity to observe marine mammals in their natural habitat. Iceland and Norway are preferred European observation locations, in addition to the normal southern destinations. Iceland is considered to be the real whale watching center, where the industry has seen rapid growth beyond the European average over the past years.

Still, this touristic onrush to the ocean can become detrimental to living whales and dolphins if it is not steered responsibly. Many operators that offer whale watching excursions often lack the optimal knowledge required for organizing responsible tours. For this reason, OceanCare, the Swiss organization for the protection of marine mammals, sought cooperation with Kontiki Saga, Glur Reisen and Scandinavian Airlines (SAS).

This cooperation project is aimed at evaluating various whale watching tour operators in Iceland and Norway based on uniform criteria. "Together with the operators offering these trips, our goal is to improve whale watching for the benefit of these docile giants of the sea," explains Nele Davignon from SAS: "At the same time, travellers from participating agencies should be able to profit from sustainable tour offers."

The first such evaluation process of four tour operators offering whale watching excursions has now been completed. Six evaluation categories were examined: maintenance of the observation platform, customer friendliness, behavior towards animals at sea, environmental learning opportunities, research activities and environmental behavior. "Three of the operators carry out very informative and exciting observation tours that turn into unforgettable experiences," states Silvia Frey, from OceanCare's Whale Research section. "Some of them also help to extend people's knowledge about these animals."

All ships were in perfect condition and contributed to a comfortable trip. However, none of the operators adhered fully to the local Whale Watching Guidelines, referring to people's behavior near whales and dolphins. "This is an important aspect, for they should be disturbed as little as possible," the whale researcher warns: "but all of them went closer than the prescribed distance to the animals, stayed with them longer than prescribed and even downright pursued them." Collaboration is now being sought with the operators to

improve this situation.

Both Ivan Köhle from Kontiki Saga and Heidi Glur from Glur Reisen commented: "As travel agencies involved in this project, we agree to always supply our guests with a copy of the Whale Watching Guidelines with their travel documents. In this way they can orient themselves beforehand on what is considered acceptable behavior during such excursions." In addition, OceanCare offers an online platform where travellers can report their positive and critical impressions of tours. This will allow improvements which benefit both humans and animals. Plans exist to continually expand the joint project.

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