

An international whale-watching certification to drive industry towards environmental excellence

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Background

The **intensive and disrespectful** whale-watching can have **negative impacts on cetaceans**, both at the individual and population levels therefore **weakening the durability of the activity itself**. But the activity has also a huge **awareness and educational potential**, it can be a **source of economic development** and provide **research opportunities**.

In **2005**, a study carried out along the French Mediterranean coast¹ showed that:

- There were a **+3.5% a year growing activity** (Figure 1);
- 2/3 of the operators had **intrusive approaches** and provided **incomplete and/or wrong information** to their passengers;
- The activity generated **1.73 million** euros of expenditures annually;
- Most operators **were willing to participate** to a management programme.

Following this study, French operators were involved in the process of the **creation of a management tool** for the whale-watching activity.

In **2014**, after ten years of consultation, the ACCOBAMS Agreement registered the **High Quality Whale-Watching®** trademark, jointly developed with the Pelagos Sanctuary.

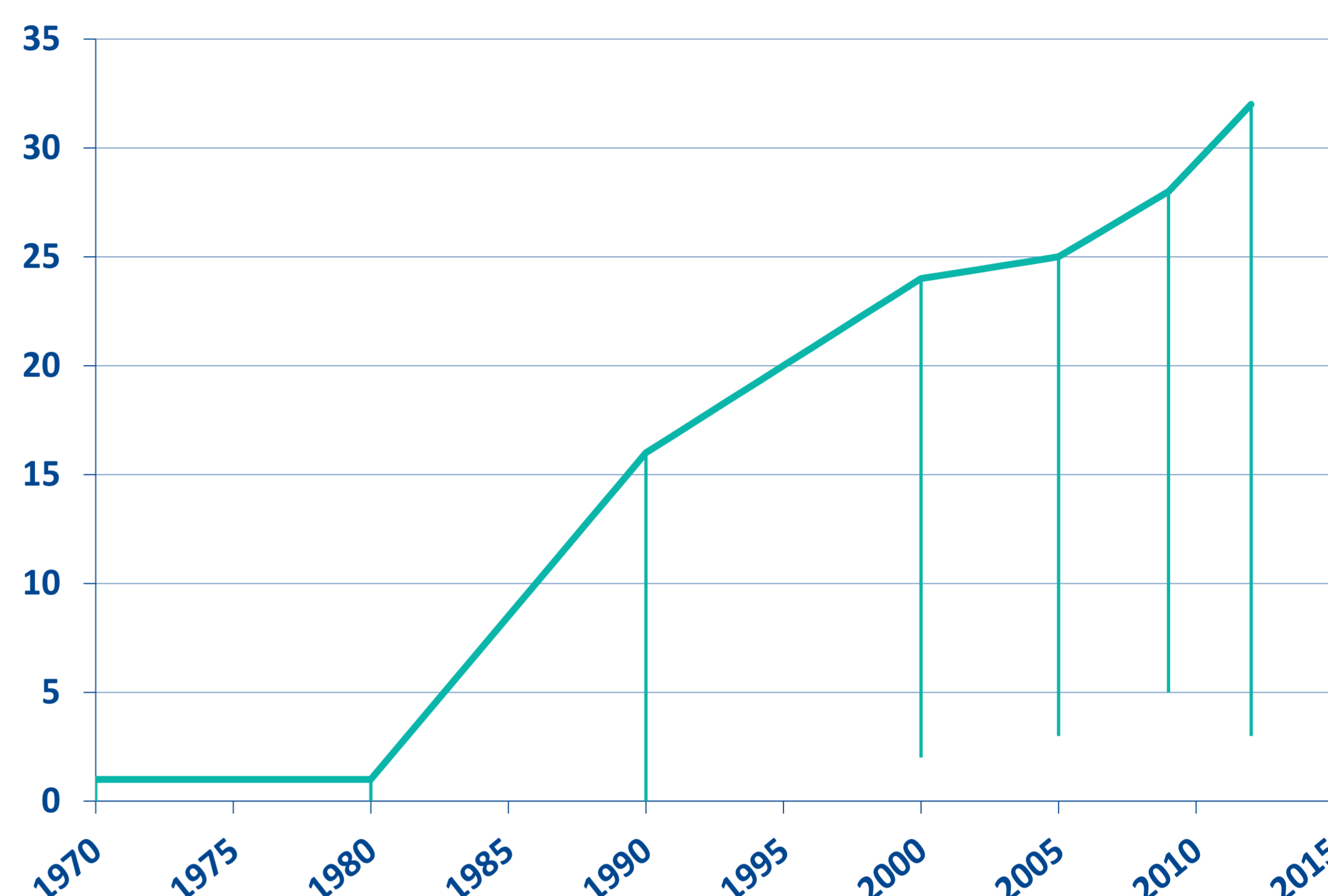


Figure 1. Evolution of the number of whale-watching operators along the French Mediterranean coast. Each vertical bar represents a census. The gap between the horizontal axis and the bar represents the number of operators having stopped their activity since the previous census².

The High Quality Whale-Watching® certification



• Naturalist tours

Trips shall have a naturalist approach and commit to the Code of Good Conduct implemented by the Pelagos Sanctuary and the ACCOBAMS Agreement. Swim-with-cetaceans activities are banned from the certification and aerial detection assistance is also excluded in France.

• Quality information

There shall always be a crew member on-board that has attended a 3-day dedicated training course. Each manager must have followed the training course as well.

• Sustainability

Provision of waste sorting bins shall be implemented and no disposable crockery shall be provided on-board.

• Research

Operators shall provide their observations to scientific bodies. The free REPCET smartphone application (www.repcet.com) enables them to take part in a large-scale ship strike reduction programme.

• Evaluation

Operators shall be evaluated at least once every three years by a Committee. In addition, evaluation sheets are given to passengers who are invited to send them back to the organisation in charge of managing the certification.

Currently in France, 42% of operators are certified including one operator who agreed to give up aerial detections to join the certification in 2014. This was the first example of a clear change in practices and it is very encouraging for the coming years. **One operator is also certified in the Principality of Monaco.** In 2017, the number of certified operators **could be raised to 52%** in France.

Perspectives

If the number of operators keeps increasing, the current certification **will not be enough** to deal with an intensive activity. Thoughts on the introduction of **permits** are on-going, but this next step, like all the others before, will necessarily involve close collaboration with whale-watching operators. In the long term, the objective of this international certification is to be implemented over the **entire ACCOBAMS area** in order to provide **a common management tool for commercial whale-watching activities**.

References

1 Mayol, P. and Beaubrun, P. (2005) - *Le Whale Watching en Méditerranée Française : Etat des lieux et perspectives*. Souffleurs d'Ecume / Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes. 103p.

2 Mayol, P., Di-Méglio, N., David, L., Couvat, J., Labach, H. and Ratel, M. (2014) - *Le whale-watching en Méditerranée française : état des lieux et recommandations*. Scientific Report of Port-Cros national Park. 28: 133-143



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