

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

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Background

Whale-watching has been rapidly increasing along the French Mediterranean coast. On the one hand, it has a **huge awareness and educational potential**, it can be a **source of economic development** and provide **research opportunities**. On the other hand, **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**.

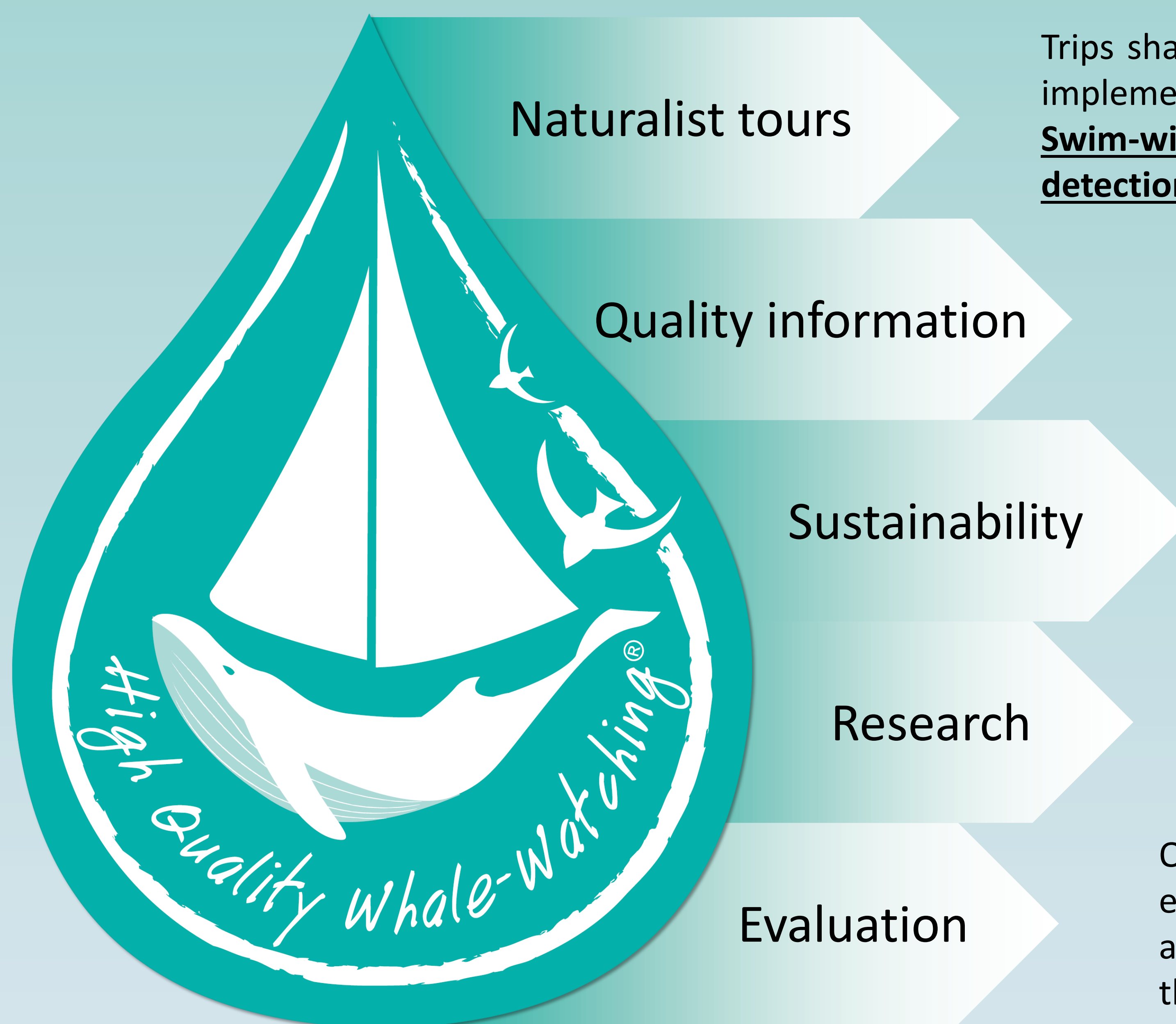
In **2005**, the first study was carried out along the French Mediterranean coast¹ and showed that:

- There were **25 operators**, with **growing perspectives (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, operators were involved in the process of the **creation of a management tool** for the whale-watching activity.

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

The High Quality Whale-Watching® certification



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. In France, **aerial detection assistance** is also excluded from the certification.

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.

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

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**.

Operators shall be visited **at least once every three years**; reports are examined by a Committee and potential sanctions may be decided. In addition, **evaluation sheets** are given to passengers who are invited to send them back to the organisation in charge of managing the certification.

In 2014, **11 out of 31 operators (35%)** received the certification, a number that raised to **14** in 2015 (45%, Figure 2) including two operators who agreed **to give up aerial detections to join the certification**. This is the first example of a clear change in practices and it is very encouraging for the coming years.

Perspectives

- If the number of operators keeps increasing (currently about **+3.5% a year**), 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



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 census.²

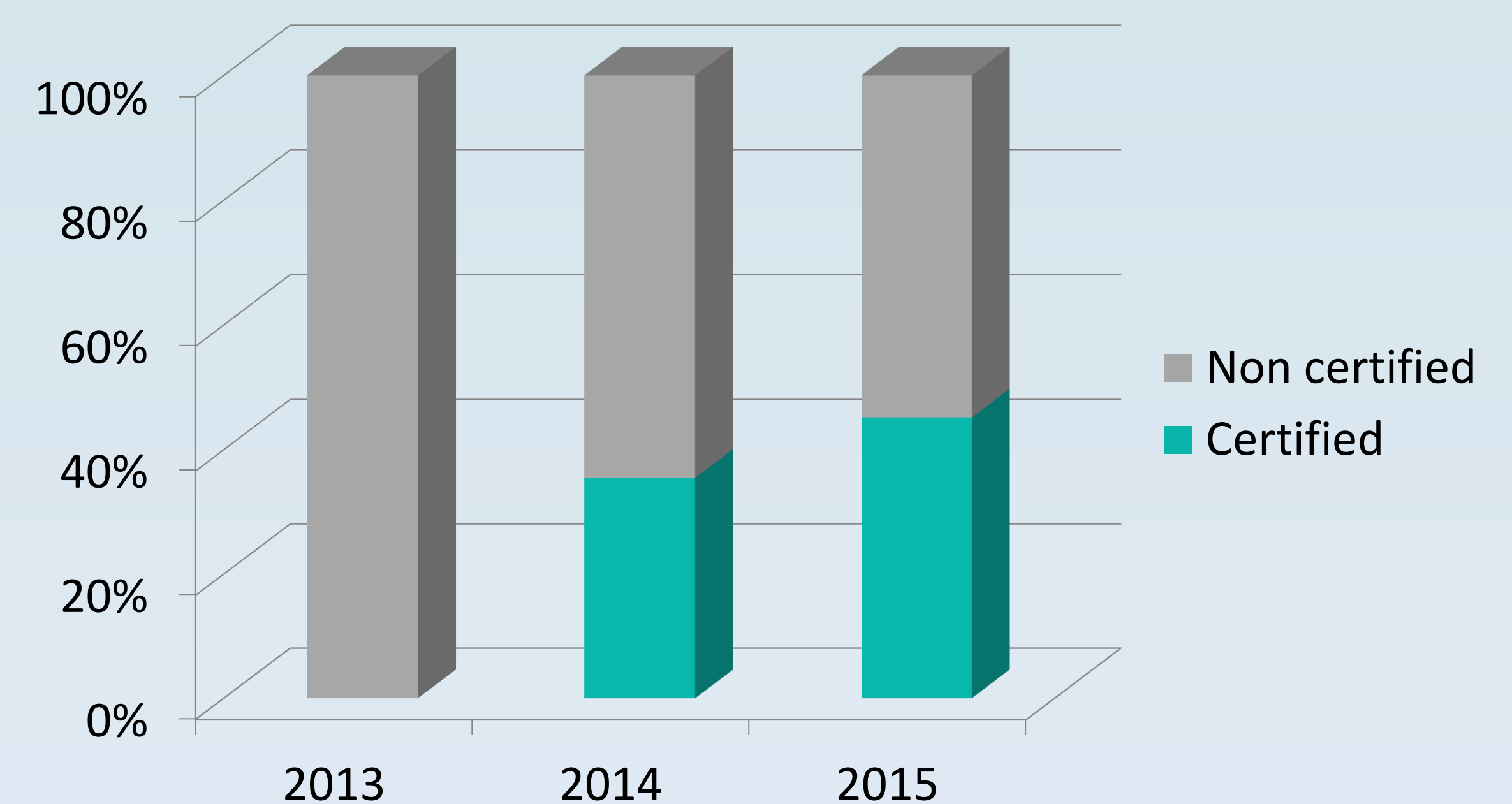


Figure 2. Proportion of High Quality Whale-Watching® certified operators on the French Mediterranean coast (n=31)