

Blue Habits: Motivating pro-ocean behaviors among Oceanic Society's nature travelers

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Although nature-based travel programs are widely recognized for their potential to impact social development, sustainable economic activity, and environmental protection at their destinations, their ability to transform tourists' attitudes and achieve pro-environmental, post-travel behavioral outcomes has been largely overlooked. In partnership with the Oceanic Society, researchers from Stanford University's Woods Institute for the Environment and Graduate School of Education are addressing this challenge through a study to address environmentally related behavior following whale watching tours. We will build on and extend prior research in this vein (Ballantyne et al., 2010; Hughes, 2011; Wheaton et al., in review; Ardoin et al., in review).

The study will begin by assessing the Oceanic Society's California whale-watching programs, which serve more than 1,700 tourists per year, for opportunities to target specific pro-ocean behavioral outcomes. We will then design and fine-tune educational messaging provided by onboard naturalists and the pre- and post-trip communications with travelers in order to target specific pro-ocean behaviors. Results and methods will be shared with whale watching operators in California and elsewhere in the United States, as well as with the global ecotourism community.

The research team is using a quasi-experimental design to assess visitors before, immediately after, and three months following their tour to examine for differential impacts related to post-trip follow-up interventions given to each of the groups. The post-trip interventions will include a range of technologies such as, for example, mobile and web-based platforms, to support trip participants in their environmental behavior and ocean health-related commitments following their whale watching tours.

During the initial pilot phase, the research team will assess Oceanic Society's whale watching trips by observing naturalists in action with the goal of identifying relevant environmental behaviors to target, as well as specific opportunities for behavior change interventions. Together with Oceanic Society staff, the researchers will interview Oceanic Society naturalists to discuss their perceptions as seasoned professionals about opportunities and methods for behavior change interventions within this context. In addition, we will conduct simple pre- and post-trip surveys to collect initial, exploratory data about participants' pre-existing motivations and attitudes, and we will assess participants according to several criteria, including, for example: (1) scientific understanding of ecological principles described during tours; (2) views of nature, environmental identity, and environmental behavior; and (3) demographic variables.

Next, the researchers and Oceanic Society staff will collaboratively review results of the observations, consultations, and passenger survey data in the context of previous research (e.g., Ardoin et al., in review; Ballantyne et al., 2010) to identify key behaviors to target, with an emphasis on behaviors directly linked with the whale-watching activities (e.g., personal plastic use, seafood choices, story-sharing, citizen science activities, advocacy, and philanthropy). We will then use behavioral science and learning theory to inform development of a suite of activities and interventions to target the selected behaviors during key moments in the tourist experience. Finally, we will conduct delayed post-surveys three months after the behavioral intervention to measure changes in behavior, attitudes, and environmental identity.

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