

A Research-Action Project on Environmental Education for Conservation of Marine Mammals and Whalewatching in the Central Coast of Venezuela

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The central coast of Venezuela is habitat for Atlantic spotted (*Stenella frontalis*) and bottlenose (*Tursiops truncatus*) dolphins, as well as Bryde's whales (*Balaenoptera edeni*). Dolphins are present year-round, while Bryde's whales occur here from October through February every year. Cetacean encounter rates are over 60%. On the basis of previous research results, SEA VIDA presented a proposal in 2001 for developing responsible whale-watching in the region. The basic premises for this proposal included scientific research, legal authorization, training of human resources, environmental education and participation-development of the local communities. In order to increase awareness of marine mammal conservation and achieve local participation and support for whale-watching related activities, a research-action project was implemented with high school students participating as field assistants. Action-research is a type of research intended to find solutions for a problem through a participatory and interactive way. Lectures, videos (first phase) and ecological games (second phase) about the cetaceans of the region were presented in five elementary schools during March-April 2005. The primary audiences of these activities were children of 7th, 8th and 9th grade and their teachers. Secondary audiences included local NGOs, businesses, and politicians. At this time, the sensitized audience includes at least 200 children, 15 teachers, and 15 stakeholders. As a result of these activities, a special committee was created in order to design and organize a tourism festival about the dolphins of the region. Although awareness at a local level has increased, more efforts are needed to further encourage local communities to participate in conservation efforts and in whale-watching related activities.