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#Bucketlist: exploring the motivations of tourists to swim with humpback whales in Niue

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Swim-with-whales tourism has become a growing aspect of the marine mammal tourism scene. Several remote island destinations allow for these in-water experiences. Understanding swim-with-whales tourists' motivations is an important aspect to effectively promoting and managing these interactions. This paper focuses on tourist motivations for swimming with humpback whales (Megaptera novaeangliae) in Niue. A qualitative research approach using 21 semi-structured in-depth interviews was used to gain these. A thematic approach to understanding the data identified eight themes that describe intrinsic and extrinsic motivations in these whale-swim participants. Of particular interest was the emotional component of engaging in the activity. In contrast to other research on marine wildlife tourism motivations, the importance of learning was absent in this study. These findings highlight the personal and variable nature of individual motivations for participating in commercial whale-swims.

Keywords: *marine wildlife tourism, swim-with programmes, humpback whales, Niue, tourist motivations*

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Swimming with whales as a new trend

The marine wildlife tourism product comprises an array of opportunities to encounter marine species, such as the viewing of pelagic birds (petrels, skuas, shearwaters, etc.); observations and interactions with elasmobranchs (sharks, rays and skates); and observatory and interactive engagement with marine mammals (Newsome et al. 2005; Rodger et al. 2010). The spectrum ranges from passive (land- or vessel-based) observations to more interactive and close encounters via feeding and swimming programmes (Bulbeck 2005).

Swim-with programmes (SWPs) or in-water interactions (IWIs) are components of commercial tours designed to provide close encounters with a plethora of marine species (Pagel et al. 2020a; Wiener 2013). Swim-with activities, in which humans enter the water to encounter free-ranging marine mammals up close, are probably the most popular form of in-water interactions (Samuels/Bejder 2004; Wiener 2013). They involve encounters with odontocetes (toothed whales) and, to a lesser extent, mysticetes (baleen whales). The latter includes commercial swim-with programmes with humpback whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) that have experienced a spike in popularity over the last two decades (Orams 2001; 2002; 2013).

The small Pacific Island nation of Niue is one of the few locations worldwide where it is legally possible to swim with humpback whales – besides Tonga, Australia, Réunion, the Dominican Republic, French Polynesia and Norway (Figure 1).

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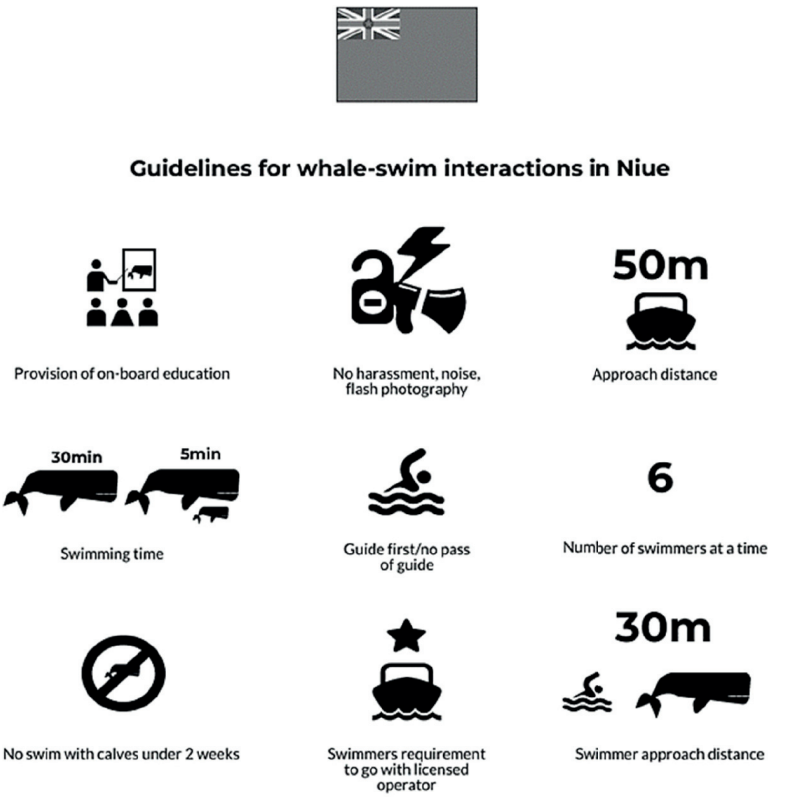
Figure 1 Locations of commercial in-water interactions with humpback whales

Niue is a single island in the Polynesian triangle (located between Tonga, Samoa and the Cook Islands) and the world's smallest self-governing state, with a local population of fewer than 1500 inhabitants. It is in free association with New Zealand. The label 'the rock of Polynesia' reveals its unique constitution: steep limestone cliffs up to 65 m above sea level and a reef that surrounds the island are characteristic of the destination (Barker 2000; Treloar/Hall 2005). The lack of extensive sandy beaches is compensated for by a vast coral reef ecosystem that is a crucial habitat for many marine species, providing sound underwater visibility, attracting scuba divers and snorkellers from all around the world (Tourism Niue, pers. communication, August 2018). According to the South Pacific Tourism Organisation (2019), with approximately 10 000 visitors in 2017, Niue's tourism industry is still small compared to other Pacific Island destinations.

Most visitors come during winter (high season June to October) when the first humpback whales (Niuean: *Tafuā*) arrive in the South Pacific to mate or give birth. The occurrence of the humpback whales that belong to the endangered Oceania population is an important economic factor for the local tourism industry and can be experienced through land-based observation at designated sites and commercial boat-based operations. In 2018, three commercial operators offered swim-with-humpback whale tours in the high season. Although lesser known than the 'whale-swim capital' of Vava'u in Tonga, Niue's ventures have been in existence since the late 1990s (Tourism Niue, pers. communication, August 2018). Niue has established local guidelines based on international standards which seek to minimise potential impacts on the whales. However, recreational boaters, often unfamiliar with local guidelines, cause concern regarding their approaches to and interactions with the whales (Tourism Niue, pers. communication, August 2018). Figure 2 depicts the Niuean guidelines for commercial swim activities with humpback whales.

Swim-with-humpback whale encounters generally focus on mother–calf pairs (except in Norway). They are characteristically slow-moving, preferring the water surface, and are found in locations with sea conditions and underwater visibility more suitable for swim activities (Orams 2013) (Figure 3).



Sources: Adapted from International Fund for Animal Welfare et al. (2008); Tourism Niue Office (pers. communication, August 2018).

Figure 2 Guidelines for whale-swim interactions in Niue

Figure 3 Mother–calf pair as popular targets for commercial swim programmes

However, targeting nursing mother–calf pairs of whales for tourism does not come without controversy: Recent research in Tonga confirmed an increase in time mother–calf pairs spent diving in the presence of swimming activities, with avoidance behaviour being documented towards tour vessels in one-third of vessel approaches (Fiori et al. 2019). The diminishing of critical surface resting times for mother–calf pairs can compromise a calf's viability (Braithwaite et al. 2015). Documents such as the *Pacific Regional Guidelines for Whale and Dolphin Watching* (International Fund for Animal Welfare et al. 2008) and the more recent *Global Best Practice Guidance for Responsible Whale and Dolphin Watching* (World Cetacean Alliance 2018) recommend more restrictions, or even prohibiting in-water interactions by tourists with mother–calf pairs. Apart from animal welfare, such whale encounters further raise questions concerning tourist safety after several participants of whale-swim tours in Western Australia were injured by humpback whales (Pagel et al. 2020b).

While more attention is now dedicated to the exploration of commercial swim-with-whales programmes in other global hotspots regarding their sustainability and potential impacts on populations (for example, Barra et al. 2020; Chazot et al. 2020; Fiori et al. 2019; Hoarau et al. 2020; Sprogis et al. 2020), to date no study has focused on activities in Niue. Further, the reasons why people choose to swim with large whales has received scant empirical investigation. Understanding the perspectives of those who are engaging in marine wildlife tourism activities can contribute to valuable input for management and decision-makers.

This paper reports on a study into the motivations for swimming with humpback whales in Niue as communicated by swim-with tour participants. In doing so, it aims to shed light on the potential drivers that lie behind the increase in whale-swim tourism in recent years.

1.2 Motivations and wildlife encounters

Understanding why people travel and engage in certain behaviour has been a quest for social scientists for decades. A wide range of research has shown that motivation is dynamic and highly complex regarding human behaviour (Fishbein/Ajzen 1975; Maslow 1968). According to Burns (1999: 51), grasping what motivates tourists to engage in associated travel behaviour 'is at the heart of understanding tourism'. Knowledge of tour participants' motivations and behaviour is required to enhance the quality of the wildlife experience and for a venture to foster its sustainability in the long term (Gnanapala 2017). While exploring motivations of vessel-based whale-watching participants, Orams (2000: 563) concluded that 'motivation for human action is rarely as simple as "getting close to whales"'. Previous studies on encounters with endangered species, in both the terrestrial and marine realms, focusing on tourist motivations have shown a multitude of facets that can be influenced by culture, age and gender (Apps et al. 2016; Cong et al. 2014; Ziegler et al. 2012). Further, motivation is influenced by the wide-ranging skill levels and competencies tourists display (from novice to expert) as people participate in specific activities and settings to meet various personal and social needs (Buckley 2012; Creyer et al. 2003; Pomfret/Bramwell 2016). According to Ewert (1994), who explored adventure recreation participation, the number and complexity of motivational factors may vary significantly between highly experienced outdoor recreationists and those with less experience in each activity. Those motivations may either be intrinsic (driven by emotional aspects, escapism, relaxation, sensation-seeking and spending time with peers)

or extrinsic (fostered by the attraction of recreational activities, scenery, safety or self-image) (Barlow et al. 2013; Ewert et al. 2013; McGehee et al. 1996).

The global growth of nature-based tourism was explained by Curtin (2013) as deriving from an inherent affiliation and need for nature, its redeeming capacity for mental regeneration and exciting, transformative experiences. Today, influenced by pop culture, many people have developed personal 'bucket lists' – that is, records of what they want to have seen, done or accomplished before they die (Bell/Lyall 2002). Swimming with marine life, particularly dolphins, is ranked highly on such must-do lists (Hu et al. 2009). Connecting through eye contact, touch or sharing space with wildlife has been identified as a critical motive for those who seek close encounters (Curtin 2006; Knight 2009). The desire to add value and meaning to one's life is another incentive attributed to people who want to interact with animals (Curtin 2013). Animals can elicit different responses from people that depend on physical (for example, being large or furry), ecological (for example, rare, carnivorous) or behavioural attributes (for example, intelligent, anthropomorphic features) (Newsome et al. 2005), influencing motivation to interact with certain species. Unsurprisingly, animals that exhibit human-like attributes in appearance or behaviour are more likely to be pursued for wildlife tourism activities (Tremblay 2002). Kellert (1996) noted the desire of wildlife tourists to become affected, highlighting the role of charismatic animals such as whales as 'service providers' in the tourism industry. This was confirmed by Zeppel and Muloin (2014), who found that whales approaching whale-watching boats also heightened the emotional affinity and sense of privilege felt by visitors.

The empirical exploration of commercial SWPs involving humpback whales and the personal incentives of those who put on their snorkelling gear aims to improve the understanding of the sector's shift from a passive, observational approach to more interactive human–wildlife encounters involving rather unconventional species.

2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

Any research is framed by paradigms or worldviews that inform a researcher's approach to defining research questions and gathering, analysing and assigning meaning to their data. This research adopts a constructivist paradigm, seeking an improved understanding of close encounters with humpback whales by focusing on social processes and interactions and furnishing complex insights into participant perceptions and realities (Schwandt 2000; 2007). Constructivism is concerned with the construction of meaning by those who experience a specific phenomenon (Braun/Clarke 2013). In this study, as a researcher, I take a relativist approach, assigning equal value to all versions of reality.

From an epistemological standpoint, the constructivist paradigm facilitates a more personal and subjective relationship with the respondents, as the researcher is actively participating in a dialogue rather than being detached from the research, and understandings are being co-created through the relationship between the investigator and the respondents (Guba/Lincoln 2005). As a consequence, I chose to locate myself in the phenomenon to relate with the study participants, taking a subjectivist stance. The scheme 'critical subjectivity' supports the development of knowledge rather than the perception that one must abandon personal views to maintain objectivity (Heron/Reason 2006).

Situated in the west of Niue, the capital, Alofi, was selected as the study area (Figure 4). Although the Kingdom of Tonga features an established whale-swim

Figure 4 Location and map of Niue

industry around migrating humpback whales, I decided to focus on operations in Niue to address a lesser-known and small-scale industry in the area which, concerning swimming operations, has received no attention from academia so far.

This research adopted semi-structured in-depth interviews with whale-swim tour participants. Interviews are generally used to capture the varying perspectives of respondents that describe their subjective views (Luo/Wildemuth 2009; Picken 2018). Bunce et al. (2000: 96) suggested using semi-structured interviews to generate 'in-depth and explanatory, qualitative information on specific issues', and to allow 'an exchange of information between the facilitator and informant'. Executing semi-structured interviews is a sound method for grasping people's motivations; however, they are still under-represented in the exploration of marine wildlife tourism research and its social aspects.

Hence, such interviews featuring open-ended questions allowed insights into tourists' perceptions of their motivations to participate in a swimming-with-whales experience in Niue. The interview guide developed for the present research was structured around subjects that corresponded to the study's objectives. They comprised questions around demographics and motivations for tour participants to come to Niue and, further, to engage in whale-swims and how they found out about them.

To ensure a high standard of research, a pre-test was conducted before data collection in Niue was started. Testing an interview guide before the scheduled fieldwork is an essential step to see whether the questions are appropriately phrased and sequenced, or where the guide needs clarification. Interview partners for the test can range from colleagues, family and friends to tourism authorities. After evaluating the interviews, changes made included the shortening and opening of questions.

Further, this study underwent a formal application with the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC). Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) have highlighted the importance of the moral integrity and sensitivity displayed by the researcher when working on social matters.

Data collection in Niue was conducted over three weeks, from 1 August to 21 August 2018. The collaborating tour operator offered two whale encounter trips per

day, six days per week. Whale-swim operations were conducted on 13 days in the data-collection period. I aimed to complete data collection within two weeks, conducting a minimum of ten interviews, while the third week was extra time in case there were unforeseeable events in the data-collection phase. One week could not be used due to poor weather conditions (westerlies and rain) or due to the inability of the tour operator to locate whales on the trip.

English-speaking visitors aged 18 years and older who booked a tour with a selected tour provider were approached at the operator's base during check-in, where I then introduced myself and the present study. This was done to ensure participants would have enough time to consider the invitation (at least two hours). Interviews were carried out with groups of 1–3 people at a time, with the composition of interview groups left to the participants, accommodating families as well as single travellers (Cole 2004).

A total of 21 separate interviews with tour participants were completed using a convenience or availability sampling approach which allowed for collecting data on a small population of marine tourists (usually up to 12 participants a day) within a short time-frame of fieldwork (three weeks). Interviews were documented using a recording device and converted into verbatim transcriptions in Microsoft Word. Participants were anonymised and given pseudonyms that reflect their gender, age and cultural background to facilitate an open dialogue. A thematic analysis was applied for finding, evaluating and communicating patterns within the data corpus and followed the six steps for thematic analysis laid out by Braun and Clarke (2006: 87):

1. Familiarising oneself with the data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Interpreting and reporting.

Codes for this study were characterised as semantic, and intended to mirror and illustrate participants' language and concepts rather than identifying implicit meanings grounded in a conceptual or theoretical framework (Braun/Clarke 2013). The main types of coding applied in this research were in vivo and value coding. In vivo coding uses terms that are produced by the participant (Strauss 1987), and was chosen here to highlight and prioritise the participants' voices in this research, which is essential when exploring subjective content such as perceptions and experiences. For the processes of coding and memoing to support theme development, the software programs NVivo and Scrivener were used. The identified themes were then collated into a comprehensive affinity diagram.

When interpreting data it is the researcher's task to transform the information that was provided by participants into stories in which their attitudes, believes and values shine through. This can be challenging as the analysis is shaped by interpretation, nurtured by subjectivity and the researcher's own beliefs. Given this scenario, Braun and Clarke (2013) have argued that this story is our very own idea of how people make sense of the respective phenomena that are being investigated, putting researchers in a powerful position when it comes to representing the 'other'. As the researcher acts as the executive research tool, biases may occur in various stages of constructing research, data collection and analysis. Reflecting the knowledge that is produced with qualitative research is acting as quality control and, when conducted on a personal level, provides an opportunity for the researcher to bring him/herself in, to make him/herself visible within the research setting (Braun/Clarke 2013).

Conducting semi-structured interviews may produce various pitfalls that need to be considered. When communicating face-to-face, the interviewer's postures, gestures, tone of voice and even pronunciation may impact the way a person responds to the questions asked. To remain neutral throughout the interviews, therefore, it is essential to reduce potential bias in responses (Leedy/Ormrod 2001). However, with self-reported data, honesty or accuracy may be overshadowed by problems in recall, as well as by under/overestimating on purpose (Stone/Turkkan 2000). Interviewees may also unconsciously 'spoil' the interview by their internal unconscious reactions (Diefenbach 2009). The excitement and acceleration interviewees felt right after their whale encounters may have contributed to a somewhat 'tainted' interview. However, these emotions may have revealed the true feelings and values of whale-swim participants, providing a rich, qualitative data set. A greater issue in social research and interviewing processes constitutes the 'socially accepted answering attitude' whereby interviewees respond pleasingly and in a way they think is socially accepted (Diefenbach 2009). Hence, I acknowledge that my background and my introduction as a biologist may have influenced the participants' responses.

Limitations of this study include the relatively small number of tour participants considered for interviews, due to me working autonomously on-site. I also decided to work with only one local tour operator. To be able to conduct the on-site interviews and gain access to tour participants, I was highly dependent on tour operators supporting and granting me access to approach and interview their guests on their premises. This can be challenging for researchers. While I may have gained different insights from guests of other companies offering whale-swim experiences on the island, I prioritised relationship- and rapport-building with one tour operator.

The aim to include other critical local stakeholders – such as opinions of managers, researchers and NGOs – could not be met. The hesitancy to contribute to this study I have experienced was unfortunate, particularly because collaborations between managing authorities, local community members and conservation advocates may contribute to a more holistic understanding of the effects of human interactions with marine wildlife.

For data analysis, NVivo was used for coding and generating codebooks for each case. However, the program was not used beyond these initial steps of data analysis as it was deemed to be less efficient than working with hard copies of the transcripts and developing an affinity diagram.

3 RESULTS

Analysis of the data resulted in eight major themes being identified (Figure 5). Figure 6 then highlights some background information on the whale-swim participants visiting Niue.

3.1 Word-of-mouth

The theme 'word-of-mouth' reports on the interviewee's engagement with peers who had participated in the whale-swim in Niue and recommended the activity to them. Those recommendations were found to be pivotal for tourists visiting Niue and seeking the experience themselves:

> Yeah, I guess for us coming to Niue the first time, a friend of ours had recommended coming and trying this with the whales. (Delilah)

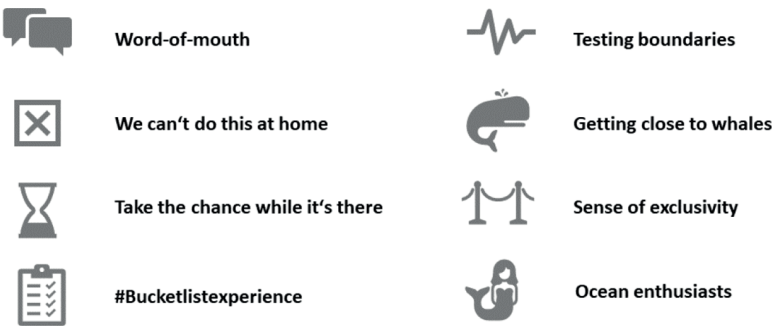


Figure 5 Themes displaying the motivations of whale-swim participants in Niue

Figure 6 Background information on whale-swim participants visiting Niue

[W]e've asked them what their best experience was, and they said: 'The whales in Niue' … so we decided then … the following winter, to go to Niue. And here we are. (Jeff)

[A friend] told me that you could swim with whales and I was [gasps] fascinated and really wanted to do it. (Paulette)

3.2 We can't do this at home

Participants mentioned that the opportunity to swim with whales in Niue was one they wanted to take because it was not offered in their home countries, forming the theme 'we can't do this at home'. In New Zealand, where most respondents came from, it is prohibited by law to swim with whales:

Because, first of all, the idea of actually being able to swim with or near whales is extremely attractive. And it's something you cannot do in New Zealand. (Dave)

Probably to experience something that we are unlikely to see anywhere else. We don't have the opportunity in New Zealand … probably the greatest contact we had in New Zealand was when we had these whale strandings … and it's not the nicest way to see them. (Jeff)

3.3 Take the chance while it's there

Further, respondents expressed concern that these operations would not be offered in the future. They were taking the opportunity while it lasted as they anticipated extended restrictions:

Because it's going to become more regulated and I was not sure for how long we will be able to swim with whales … my motivation was to take the chance when I had the opportunity. (Danielle)

Yeah, I think it's one of the last opportunities, I think you gonna see the whales … in the water … because … I doubt that this activity will continue for very much longer … I think there will be more pressure and then the operators have to obey sooner or later. So I guess you have to take the opportunity. (Greg)

You know … might not be available to swim with them. It's cool to take the chance while it's there. (Nick)

Another reason was a previously missed opportunity to swim with humpback whales in Tonga:

I'd been to Tonga last year, and unfortunately, I've missed the whales … they were … and I missed out. So it's another opportunity, and it's been fantastic! (Basil)

3.4 #Bucketlistexperience

For some whale-swim participants their experience of sharing the marine environment with humpback whales was a long-desired item on a must-do list, forming the theme '#Bucketlistexperience':

Yeah yeah, privileged to do so and a real bucket list experience. (Hamish)

Because first, I worked offshore all my life. And I lived close to the sea all my life. I'm really a sea guy … I have a boat, I am a diver, and so interested in marine wildlife. And

the whales are on the top. I've seen sharks, I've seen manta rays, I dove anywhere in the world … The whales are something like a grail. Do you know what a grail is? (Pierre)

I always wanted to do it … So it was here or in Tonga where you can do it. (Andrew)

3.5 Testing boundaries

Swimming with whales in an open-ocean environment was also viewed as an opportunity to push personal boundaries, highlighted in the theme 'testing boundaries':

Honestly, because I am always into new experiences and those that kind of push my personal boundaries. And for me, I have been doing this a lot in my life, but there was an apprehensive nervousness about, you know, this is a massive animal, but I have the opportunity to get closer than I would ever have imagined … and so there is this idea about pushing boundaries and this personal try out like 'whoa, I swam with a humpback whale'. (Julia)

3.6 Getting close to whales

In the theme 'getting close to whales' it was paramount for tour participants to follow their deep admiration for whales, fostered by their characteristics and perceptions of spirituality associated with their encounter:

I don't know, I am passionate … I am an animal lover … I mean we were lucky enough … we did the Gorillas in Rwanda … so 21 years ago, and I would write the experience with the whales to that … you just get close to something you always admire as an animal species … that's quite incredible. (Andrea)

I love whales, I have read a book about whales … whales are superb ambassadors for so many things … non-human intelligence, for conservation, for I think living a lot of values that I aspire to, you know … gentle, graceful, aware of their environment … they are magnificent. (James)

My motivation … ever since I was a kid I read stories about islanders swimming with whales and interacting with them and especially on the south coast of NSW where I come from, stories about whales were everywhere. How they interacted with human beings and umm … I always wanted this sort of experience … it's hard to put in words; it's almost a spiritual experience. And it's because they are enormous gentle creatures … and intelligent as well. And part of me felt I can communicate [laughing]. (Craig)

3.7 Sense of exclusivity

In-water encounters with whales were further viewed as something only a few people experience, fostering a 'sense of exclusivity':

I think not many people in the world are getting to experience it, so … kinda like a small group of people. (Kyle)

This sense of exclusivity was also mentioned in the context of small participant numbers and, consequently, a more intimate whale encounter than previously experienced during vessel-based observations or whale-swim opportunities in Tonga:

I mean, obviously, this is what gets us … getting to the whale, getting close to the whales, small number of people … We did whale tourism in Alaska and we had 300 people on the boat … compared to today, not the same experience … not even close. (Greg)

> But I've heard of other operators in Tonga, where are numerous operators out on the water, you know, 20, 30, 40 people in the water and I have an issue with that. I think that's where Niue is very careful and advances in tourism and I think they quite control the whale-watching. (Jeff)

3.8 Ocean enthusiasts

Several interviewees highlighted their affinity with the ocean and water sports, which drew them to this activity. One participant mentioned his Polynesian roots and the significance of whales in Maori culture:

> [F]or me I think it … I love the ocean, I love the ocean … I have always loved the ocean, I have always had interactions in the ocean … I dive, I spearfish …surfing from [a] young age … and I'm part Maori as well so the whales … the humpback whales especially, have a connection to Maori culture … they are believed to be the guardians of the soul, so that was a draw for me to see them through those eyes. (Christopher)
>
> Ah look, I love snorkelling and diving, so I love sea life. And I love seeing things. (Bob)

4 DISCUSSION

The eight themes presented in the findings displayed various layers of tourist motivations to swim with humpback whales that can serve multiple underlying needs, from intrinsic to extrinsic.

However, it needs to be acknowledged that tourist motivations sometimes may be difficult to define or label, and instead follow a multi-factor motivational construct, as suggested by Ewert et al. (2013). The scholars critically discussed the intrinsic/extrinsic dichotomy and identified various congruencies between the two categories that are subject to interpretation. Here intrinsic incentives, such as sensation-seeking, may be understood as external motivation if participants of adventure activities have a fixed idea of how they should feel after their experience. Simultaneously, social factors may also stem from an intrinsic predisposition, for example, the desire to share an experience with peers (Ewert et al. 2013). The findings of the present study are no different as they display distinct overlaps and interconnections.

As one of the externally acquired motivations, interpersonal influence plays a critical role in research on tourist motivations due to its indeterminate nature and inability to be tangible before a tourism experience is pursued (Litvin et al. 2008; Phillips et al. 2013). Interviewees in this study became aware of the opportunity to swim with humpback whales in Niue through word-of-mouth (WOM) – that is, 'an oral, person-to-person communication between a receiver and a communicator whom the receiver perceives as non-commercial, regarding a brand, product, or service' (Arndt 1967: 291). Such recommendations from family members, co-workers or friends who had already engaged in the activity influenced interviewees to seek the venture for themselves. This result is less surprising as, according to a survey conducted by Nielsen in 2012, 92 per cent of consumers associated WOM (here, recommendations from friends and family) with trustworthiness. This is because credibility is generally positively related to the information source's trustworthiness (Wilson/Sherrell 1993). If my relatives and friends had a good time swimming with whales, chances are I might too – a possible reasoning of interviewees in this study.

Further, whale-swim participants in Niue communicated the appeal of doing something unavailable to them in their country of residence. While New Zealand, where most international tourists visiting Niue are coming from (SPTO 2019), has an extensive marine wildlife tourism portfolio with unique opportunities to interact with a plethora of marine life, swimming with whales is excluded from this (Department of Conservation 2020). By visiting Niue it almost appears that tourists not only indulge in escaping their everyday lives but also the legal restrictions of their home soil. Seeking novel experiences and trying as many of those available at a destination are common tourist motivations identified by scholars (for example, Moscardo/Saltzer 2004), explaining the present findings. Also, as Cater and Cater (2007) have emphasised, individuality, as an extrinsic motivation, plays a leading role in selecting recreation activities, contrasting oneself with others, which helps us understand the flourishing appeal that off-the-beaten-track experiences with less commercialised species seem to have. Lemelin (2006) noted that this can be highly addictive and may foster the need to pursue more extraordinary travel experiences that act as personal 'trophies' signalling one's accomplishments. It leads to the question if everyone has managed to tick their dolphin-swim off their must-do lists, what stories can be told to set oneself apart from the masses? Inevitably the swimming 'partners' will become bigger and more exotic, which, consequently, will require a stronger emphasis on the monitoring of in-water safety.

Another factor correlated with seeking the weird and wonderful can be found in 'taking an opportunity while it's there'. A rise in the number of travellers to the Great Barrier Reef, the Maldives or the Poles indicates an awareness that these ecosystems are likely to not be around for much longer (Adams/Carwardine 1992; Addison 2008). This trend is labelled as 'disappearing tourism', 'doom tourism' and 'last-chance tourism' (Salkin 2007). Scholars define last-chance tourism as a niche tourism market where travellers purposely seek vanishing or disappearing areas of natural or social heritage (Dawson et al. 2009; Lemelin/Johnston 2008). A critical study on this phenomenon involving wildlife tourism targeting an endangered species was conducted by Dawson and colleagues to assess the carbon footprint of polar bear (*Ursus maritimus*) experiences in Churchill, Canada. The scholars raised the point that participants of polar bear watching were predominately motivated to see the bears in their natural habitat due to their vulnerable conservation status – that is, before they vanish. Having a glimpse of vanishing icons (tigers, polar bears, giant pandas, large whales, etc.) may be paramount for travellers to visit a specific destination (Lemelin et al. 2010). However in whale-swims it is essential to note that concern about missing out on the opportunity to engage in a unique form of wildlife encounter was not found to be based on the species' potential for vanishing. Instead, it was about a probable restriction of human/whale interactions in the future. This finding is surprising given that humpback whales visiting Niue for mating and calving belong to the recovering Oceania population, making them highly vulnerable to ecological and anthropogenic impacts, including intrusive tourism operations. Higham et al. (2014) have also noted that while ecological effects are the most studied facets of whale-watching activities, people still want to experience cetaceans up close. Wheeller (1993: 128) summarised this kind of selfish behaviour among tourists in the context of sustainable tourism with the question 'What's in it for me, now?'

A possible answer to this question may be found by looking at the motivation to fulfil a personal wish in the form of completing a 'bucket list experience' and 'getting close to whales', incentives highlighted by several interviewees to swim with humpback whales. Both themes show similarities in why sharing the environment with

large baleen whales is so enticing, constituting a life-long dream for many and displaying traits of internally driven sensation-seeking. The purchase of a wildlife experience is based, according to Oliver (1997), on motives such as removing an experience deficit and creating a more valuable life. An important aspect deals with the size of the animals as, at least when it comes to aesthetic appeal, size does matter (Kellert 1996). Another explanation for visual appeal can lie in phylogenic similarity found in past studies (for example, Tremblay 2002; Zeppel/Muloin 2014), which may have contributed to tourists' desire to seek encounters with humpback whales in the present study.

To some extent the theme 'testing boundaries' can be associated with entering an alien ocean environment, with potentially challenging sea conditions and proximity to unpredictable wildlife requiring sophisticated skills and an open mindset (Curtin 2006; Pagel et al. 2020a). For this, occasionally, phobias like selachophobia (fear of sharks) or aqua/thalassophobia (fear of deep water) need to be overcome to get the desired glimpse of a whale – a possible challenge, particularly for novice participants. Opaschowski (2001) assigned emotional stimuli a high relevance within the tourist experience where people would rather purchase emotions than products. They want to experience aesthetics, atmosphere, varying intimacies and intensities personally. In essence, experiences are sold based on life-enhancement, especially relevant in human–wildlife encounters and adventure recreation.

Such intimacies also play an essential role in the present findings. A 'sense of exclusivity' portrays whale-swims as a non-mainstream activity compared with oceanic dolphin encounters. The latter has dominated the top of people's must-do lists for decades, as demonstrated in a survey by the BBC in 2003.

In this study, it became evident that one of the greatest assets of Niue's whale-swim operations, according to interviewees, is the low-key character of the tours, which sets them apart from other competing destinations such as Tonga or Australia. Mindful and more eco-conscious travellers may prefer Niue as a host destination for their whale-swim experience over more known and frequented locations as overcrowding can substantially compromise tourist satisfaction (Orams 2000; Ziegler et al. 2012). However, it is worth mentioning that whale-swims in Niue have strict regulations in place, and whether this is an influential factor for higher satisfaction in tourists preferring off-the-beaten-track destinations will require further investigation.

For some interviewees the whale-swim was another opportunity to engage in a marine leisure activity, emphasising affinity for the ocean environment and encompassed in the theme 'ocean enthusiasts'. Participants were avid scuba divers, freedivers or spearfishers who have sought recreational activities similar to those pursued in their countries of residence. Those people differ from participants primarily driven by the whales' presence as the general attraction is rather extrinsic and activity-focused. However, it has to be noted that it may also foster relaxation, feelings of escapism and immersion, as indicated for internally driven incentives, supported by the concept of flow. The latter plays a pivotal role in wildlife experiences as total immersion, awareness, control, loss of self-consciousness and, to some extent, challenge are required to feel excitement and intrinsic enjoyment during an activity. Flow is most readily experienced in autotelic activities that provide an adventure component (Csikszentmihalyi 1975; 1990). For many scuba divers, being in the water and experiencing a sense of 'flow' has a higher priority than encountering wildlife (Buckley 2010).

Finally, it needs to be noted that learning about humpback whales as an incentive to participate in whale-swims did not seem to play a role for interviewees in this study. While the present study did not actively seek to identify the role of

interpretive programmes, simultaneously they were not mentioned by participants as a motivational factor to swim with the whales. This finding is particularly worth highlighting while looking at past research involving vessel-based whale-watching activities that revealed learning about whales being as important as seeing them with one's own eyes in their natural habitat (Forestell/Kaufman 1990; Orams 2000; Tilt 1987). The worldwide growth in marine mammal-focused tours, particularly those with a swim-with component, is driven by ideas of active participation, sensation-seeking and adventure (Newsome/Rodger 2013; Pagel et al. 2020a). Because of this, the desire of participants to engage with education and learning may be suppressed. However, studies on in-water encounters in other industries with a more significant adventure underpinning – for example, shark-diving – showed a strong indication for environmental education as a primary reason to mingle with marine life (Altobelli 2011; Apps et al. 2016). Also, SWPs can affect guests' conservation attitudes more profoundly than those of participants of boat-based, observational tours (Lück 2003; 2015; 2016) and effectively alter tourists' perception of animals and their behaviour (O'Neill et al. 2004). A more distinctive similarity to the current findings provides the results for Lemelin (2006), who argued that tourist motivations to engage in the polar bear experience were not about learning about their ecology and potential threats, but instead ticking them off a personal 'bucket' or 'must-see' list – before they are gone. If learning about a species as an incentive to seek up-close encounters is no longer relevant, intruding during a critical time (here, birthing and the rearing of whale calves) for a population that is still recovering from anthropogenic impacts may raise the legitimate question: 'What's in it for the whales?' Due to this, future research on human dimensions of whale-swim encounters may adopt a stronger emphasis on the exploration of environmental education and its contribution to tourist satisfaction.

5 CONCLUSIONS

This paper aimed to provide preliminary insights into tourist motivations for engaging in swim-with programmes targeting humpback whales in Niue. The present study has shown that motivations to participate in whale-swims are manifold, with intrinsic and extrinsic incentives identified within eight themes. However, unlike in other social research involving commercial SWPs, this study cannot confirm an incentive to participate for the cause of learning about the whales. On the one hand, prioritising an emotional 'service' over interpretative programmes as a primary incentive may put the benefits for an endangered population into question as they may be outweighed by impacts such intimate encounters can have. However, on the other hand it can also be argued that, while such experiences may appear to suit the rather emotional demands of wildlife enthusiasts, they can also generate indirect benefits for focal species when people feel strongly connected by establishing a gateway for fostering conservation attitudes and more realistic perceptions of wild animals. The current findings have also identified the whale-swim experience as a long-planned endeavour, often with referral tied to the activities in Tonga. Its availability appears to be limited as interviewees in this study feared prospective restrictions. The awareness of any possible changes to the law around human–whale interactions is notable as the findings suggest that whale-swim participants are, to some extent, cognisant of their presence being potentially invasive. Yet, the desire to become emotionally affected by the whales' presence, while this

opportunity is available, may overrule any concerns. What kind of personal values and opinions on ethics, specifically on animal welfare, come into play may be subject to comprehensive, prospective studies – particularly regarding the nature of whale-swims mainly targeting vulnerable mother–calf pairs.

Further qualitative studies dealing with motivations connected to other whale-swim hotspots may facilitate an in-depth understanding of wildlife tourists' perception-based realities. Given this, a stronger focus on whale-swim participants' demographic components may contribute to additional insight into the sociological facet of SWPs. A balance between environmental and social science research is recommended for whale-swim tourism to yield comprehensive monitoring. The whale-swim industry requires recognition of tourist experiences and motivations to make predictions of future expansions of ventures and tourist demands. Niue already sets itself apart from other whale-swim capitals by offering highly regulated, small-scale operations where participants can enjoy the absence of other boats and a limited number of fellow tourists swimming with whales at a time. An expansion of these operations, as seen in many global hotspots for cetacean-focused tourism, however, may threaten this idyll and inevitably will lead to a shift towards the attraction of a different tourist clientele and, eventually, result in mass tourism. At this stage the local infrastructure does not allow for bringing in more tourists than the island can sustain. For most travellers Niue is not on the map – yet. However, social media and the display of intimate and prolonged whale encounters may soon spread the word, disclosing Polynesia's 'best-kept secret'.

The elevated hype around humpback whale-swims is not surprising given that wildlife-tourism operators and managers have to come up with various activity styles to keep their clientele engaged (Moscardo/Saltzer 2004). Hence, a move towards more stimulating and extraordinary activities is inevitable and may be confirmed by SWPs and IWIs as bucket-list items that keep participants physically and mentally active. It is therefore advised to collaborate with tour companies and to apply a stronger emphasis on the exploration of the commercial end of the whale-tourism industry. While it was not possible to include the voices of managers, local and indigenous community members and wildlife conservationists in this study, they are stakeholders whose input will be of importance for future research. In essence, the expansion of the wildlife tourism portfolio needs to meet standards for tourist safety and animal welfare to sustain its viability. It further requires a thorough consideration of whether an individual species or a local population is suitable to be targeted for commercial tourism operations.

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