

## - CONDENSED VERSION - Tangalooma Island Resort 2025 Whale Watching Survey Results

This report details findings from an eco-certification study conducted by Dr Aaron Tkaczynski from the Faculty of Business, Economics & Law, University of Queensland. This study aimed to first determine whale watcher's interest and knowledge of a whale watching experience and marine wildlife protection and their interest and knowledge of the environmental actions performed by Tangalooma Island Resort during a whale watching tour. This study also aimed to identify what environmental actions whale watchers can perform to protect marine wildlife such as whales that after experiencing a whale watching trip.

In total, 443 visitors completed a self-administered survey during the 2025 whale watching season. Most surveys were conducted using **pen and paper** at the end of a tour (72.4%). However, there were many (27.6%) that were completed by whale watchers using a Quick Response (QR) code link or via a post experience email. It was retrospectively noted that on certain trips, online surveys were unable to be completed due to the whale watching vessels being out of Wi-Fi zones.

### Knowledge and interest in whales and conservation

As Table 1 indicates (1 = lowest, 7 = highest), whale watchers were **highly interested** in whale watching and environmental practices employed by operators. They were also **very interested** in how they themselves could protect marine wildlife. Conversely, whale watchers' **knowledge** of whale watching, protecting marine wildlife and Tangalooma's environmental practices were lukewarm. These knowledge and interest findings mirror previous research at other whale watching destinations.

**Table 1. Interest and knowledge**

|                                                                                     | Average | Standard<br>Deviation | Number |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|-----------------------|--------|
| Prior to this visit....                                                             |         |                       |        |
| How interested are you in whale watching?                                           | 6.27    | 0.96                  | 445    |
| How interested are you in environmentally responsible practices?                    | 6.29    | 0.96                  | 445    |
| How interested are you in protecting wildlife?                                      | 6.59    | 0.72                  | 442    |
| How would you rate your knowledge of whale watching?                                | 3.78    | 1.60                  | 444    |
| How would you rate your knowledge of environmentally responsible tourism practices? | 4.17    | 1.62                  | 444    |

|                                                                  |      |      |     |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|------|------|-----|
| How would you rate your knowledge of protecting marine wildlife? | 4.66 | 1.46 | 442 |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|------|------|-----|

The standard deviation (range from the average rating) for the knowledge items was also relatively large, suggesting the sample's knowledge on whale watching and environmental initiatives varied considerably. In other words, some knew a lot about whales, whale watching and conservation, whilst others did not. On a positive note, the smaller variance among the three interest items suggests that most whale watchers were interested in all things relating to whale watching.

### Experience

Nine items relating to what whale watchers should expect from a whale watching experience asked. Additionally, one satisfaction item for the whole whale watching tour was provided.

**Table 2. Whale watching experience**

|                                                                                                                                           | Average | Standard Deviation | Number |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|--------------------|--------|
| Whales' normal lifestyle should not be compromised by a whale watching experience                                                         | 6.39    | 1.18               | 442    |
| Whale watchers should be able to see whales in their natural environment                                                                  | 6.40    | 0.90               | 443    |
| Whale watchers should be able to see whales in favourable ocean conditions                                                                | 6.03    | 1.20               | 442    |
| Whale watchers should have the opportunity to photograph or record whales                                                                 | 5.97    | 1.16               | 441    |
| Whale watchers should be happy to miss seeing a whale up close if the whale watching operator is following responsible wildlife practices | 6.38    | 1.02               | 444    |
| Whale watchers should have the opportunity to learn about responsible environmental practices from whale watching operators               | 6.57    | 0.71               | 444    |
| Whale watchers should appreciate paying more for a whale watching experience when responsible practices are followed                      | 5.81    | 1.39               | 444    |
| Whale watching operators should provide educational talks on whale watching conserving during a whale watching experience                 | 6.41    | 0.88               | 444    |
| Whale watching operators should provide whale watchers with digital educational material that                                             | 5.85    | 1.19               | 445    |

|                                                                            |      |      |     |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|------|-----|
| whale watchers can use to be environmentally responsible                   |      |      |     |
| I was satisfied with my Tangalooma Island Resort whale watching experience | 6.50 | 0.81 | 443 |

As Table 2 above indicates, all nine experience items were rated highly (again 1 = lowest, 7 = highest), with the lowest being whale watchers **should appreciate paying more for a whale watching experience when responsible practices are followed** (5.81) and **whale watchers should have the opportunity to learn about responsible environmental practices from whale watching operators** being the highest (6.57). Whale watchers were **incredibly satisfied** with their Tangalooma Island Resort whale watching experience with a high average score of 6.5. As the variance between all experience items and satisfaction was low, it can be assumed that what whale watchers experienced and what they thought they received was accurate and done well.

### Environmental actions

Whale watchers were then asked nine items relating to environmental actions that they perform at home. The aim of asking these questions is to see how environmentally friends whale watchers were and if a specific action needs to be promoted more by Tangalooma Island Resort and other whale watching operators in general to initiate environmental initiatives to protect the environment. As seen in Table 3, most whale watchers are **environmentally active** with respondents average rating (again 1= lowest, 7 = highest) for seven of the nine actions being over 6.

**Table 3. Environmental actions**

|                                                                                   | Average | Standard Deviation | Number |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|--------------------|--------|
| Avoid putting things like litter or detergents into gutters or storm water drains | 6.59    | 0.73               | 442    |
| Avoid putting things like paint or chemicals down the sink or toilet              | 6.57    | 0.84               | 441    |
| Use alternatives to plastic bags when doing grocery shopping                      | 6.56    | 0.85               | 443    |
| Recycle                                                                           | 6.47    | 0.83               | 434    |
| Pick up litter that may be harmful to wildlife                                    | 6.44    | 0.95               | 440    |
| Choose household products that you think are better for the environment           | 6.03    | 1.21               | 443    |
| Limit use of plastic                                                              | 6.01    | 1.22               | 443    |
| Participate in council run clean up days                                          | 5.09    | 1.95               | 438    |

|                                                                      |      |      |     |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|------|------|-----|
| Donate to and/or actively involved in helping an environmental group | 4.74 | 1.77 | 441 |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|------|------|-----|

Whale watchers limit their **waste action at home** (e.g. avoid putting chemicals down the sink- 6.57) and aim to use alternatives such as **no plastic bags** (6.56) and perform actions such as **recycling** (6.44). It is noted that participating in **council clean up days** (5.09) and **donating/volunteering** (4.74) were lower and had the greatest amount of variance. This could potentially be due to these options not being available at their usual place of residence. For example, the Chinese and Taiwanese tourists may not have council clean-up days in all regions of their countries.

### Chi-square test and correlation

To identify if any differences existed between whale watchers based on first their origin (domestic or international) and second past experience, a chi-square test was run on socio-demographic items. It was concluded that whale watchers that were Australian had higher past experience with whale watching. This experience could be anywhere around the globe (e.g. Canada, Peru or South Africa).

Next, correlation analysis was conducted to measure differences between whale watchers based on origin and past experience and this time items in Tables 1-3. It was concluded that those on their first trip were significantly more interested in whale watching and protecting marine wildlife. Not surprisingly, these tourists were also less knowledgeable about whale watching and environmental actions conducted by whale watching operators. There were no significant differences based on experience for the environmental actions and only those that were on their first trip were less happy to miss out on seeing whales if environmental guidelines were followed. Conversely, only two differences were noted between groups based on whether they were domestic or international. Australians were significantly more interested in protecting whales but were less willing to pay more for an eco-certified whale watching experience.

### Conclusions

Tangalooma Island Resort whale watchers were extremely happy with their experience during the 2025 whale watching season. These tourists are also very interested in whale watching, protecting marine wildlife and the environmental responsible practices performed by Tangalooma Island Resort when running whale watching tours. Although whale watchers' knowledge of whale watching and conservation was rated as low/lukewarm, whale watchers appear to be performing environmental actions at home that can help to protect the environment. A noted opportunity could be to ask whale watchers to donate more to an environmental initiative. These whale watchers want to protect the marine environment but are unaware it seems how their money can go to cleaning waterways or oceans, or how

local governments in regions such as the Redlands are providing measures to limit plastic entering oceans.

The identification that whale watchers were unaware that Tangalooma Island Resort is eco-certified when these tourists purchased their tour represents both an opportunity and a challenge for Tangalooma. Although eco-certification is voluntary to perform to operate a whale watching tour (whale watchers can choose to not be eco-certified and run tours), this measure allows Tangalooma to promote their commitment to sustainability. The fact that this time and financially costly measure was not noted by tourists suggests more could be promoted on Tangalooma Island Resort's website that promotes current initiatives that the organisation performs. There is information relating to the eco-centre and dolphin feeding, but information could also be provided on whale watching sustainability initiatives. As noted by the researcher from past study, many whale watchers worldwide are unaware that whale watching operators are eco-certified, despite these tourists desiring environmentally friendly operations. Therefore, this is a universal issue faced by whale watching organisations and nature-based operators in general. However, time and money spent on being environmentally friendly through eco-certification will be beneficial in the long-run to Tangalooma as it may only be a matter of time for operators to have this certification to commercially operate by government. Tangalooma should note now that eco-certification is not a contributing factor to purchasing a tour with the organisation by whale watchers, but these tourists are pleasantly satisfied with the eco-certified experience they receive. Although whale watchers want to see and take photographs/videos of whales, they also appreciate environmental procedures followed by Tangalooma Island Resort and enjoyed the commentary.

### **Contact**

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