



## **Marine Conservation and Ecotourism in Madagascar: Working to protect whales and dolphins**

Madagascar boasts some of the most extraordinary, yet highly threatened, animals, forests, and marine habitat in the world. Although poverty and unsustainable resource use are depleting the island of its biodiversity, the creation of sustainable revenue opportunities for local communities offers hope for the conservation of key endangered species, such as whales and dolphins. The Overbrook Foundation's funding for the Wildlife Conservation Society's (WCS) Cetacean Conservation and Research Program (CCRP), is helping to establish whale- and dolphin-watching tourism ventures that could provide critical income for local communities and encourage them to take pride in and conserve their natural resources. Under the direction of Dr. Howard Rosenbaum, CCRP was created through a joint partnership between WCS and the American Museum of Natural History in 1996. The Program is dedicated to protecting endangered whales, dolphins, and their critical habitats through conservation research, capacity-building, education, and community involvement.

Dolphins and whales face considerable threats from human activities in Madagascar, including renewed interest in hunting large whale species, over-fishing that reduces food sources for all cetaceans, and entanglement of humpback dolphins in fishing gear. Cetacean conservation is now facing new challenges with the planned expansion of offshore oil exploration throughout Madagascar, including Antongil Bay and the island's west coast. WCS is working with some of the major corporations of the hydrocarbon industry to limit the impact of offshore oil exploration on Madagascar's marine life.



*Humpbacks Breaching.  
Photo: Matt Leslie, CRP/WCS*

WCS is also working with the government of Madagascar to develop a stronger ecotourism industry. Its spectacular scenery, unique animals, 5,000 kilometers of coastal and marine environments, and 250 small islands make Madagascar a prime ecotourism destination. The waters surrounding Madagascar are a primary breeding and migratory destination for humpback whales in the western Indian Ocean, with Antongil Bay, neighboring Sainte Marie Island, Fort Dauphin, and the Anakao region offering unparalleled experiences of whale-watching. Yet relative to more developed countries in the region, its current level of tourism is minimal: in 2000, Madagascar received approximately 160,000 visitors (generating about \$116 million)—compared to 700,000 annual visitors to the tiny nearby island of Mauritius. As the eighth poorest country in the world, the economic value that tourism could bring to some of the world's most underserved rural communities is significant, and thus the President of Madagascar has committed to developing the ecotourism industry and tripling the size of the country's protected areas (to include the country's first Marine Protected Area) by 2012.

Since those who earn a living from ecotourism are more likely to protect natural resources, the primary focus of the Cetacean Conservation and Research Program in Madagascar has been to promote whale and dolphin ecotourism and generate sustainable local livelihoods, beginning in the northeast and southwest parts of the country. WCS is helping to develop responsible ecotourism in Antongil Bay and Anakao through training and workshops; distributing education materials, including a full-color field guide for marine mammals for ecotourism promotion and to raise awareness in the region; and facilitating ecotourism partnerships between local communities and the Malagasy National Park Service.

In the coming years, WCS will contribute to the creation of a new national Marine Protected Area by 2012, and will take part in the development of a National Conservation Plan in which ecotourism plays a central role. WCS is well-positioned to address the conservation needs of Madagascar, due to the organization's strong involvement with international management authorities such as the International Whaling Commission, as well as through a strong relationship at the national level with Madagascar's Ministry of the Environment and National Park Service.

For more information about CCRP and WCS's innovative approaches to preserving marine biodiversity around the world in Madagascar and around the world, please visit <http://www.wcs.org/international/marine/ccrp>.

