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## Press information

Sun Jul 4, 2004 09:41 PM ET

### Ecologists Push Shift from Whaling to Whale-Watching

By Svetlana Kovalyova

**ON BOARD LA SUPERBA**, Italy (Reuters) - Whale watching off the coast of Genoa can be a life-changing experience for tourists and nature-lovers.

It is also a new way for communities who once hunted the world's largest animals to earn a living, say the environmentalists who helped to set up the biggest whale sanctuary in the Mediterranean.

"When I saw my first whale some 10 years ago, it changed my life completely," said Paolo Guglielmi, head of the marine unit at the WWF Mediterranean Program.

As if to prove his point, dozens of people on board the tourist boat rushed to get a glimpse of the gray back of a whale arching for a few seconds above the waves before disappearing again, leaving the crowd momentarily speechless.

Whales, admired for their intelligence and social behavior, can measure more than 20 meters (66 feet) and weigh over 100 tonnes.

Whales and other sea mammals in the Mediterranean prompted the Romans to give what is now known as the Italian Riviera the name of Costa Balenae, or Whales' coast. The glamorous resort of Portofino takes its name from the Latin Portus Delphinii -- Dolphin's port.

Modern civilization, with its whale hunting, fishing, ship traffic and pollution drove sea mammals away from the coast and took some species to the brink of extinction.

"It's crucial to protect whales because they, as top predators, are at the top of the food chain in the oceans," said marine biologist Guglielmi. "By protecting whales and dolphins we can protect the whole environment they are living in."

#### FROM WHALING TO WHALE-WATCHING

Commercial whaling, together with irresponsible fishing, presents the biggest threat to sea mammals, killing thousands with unacceptable cruelty, conservationists say.

Three major whaling nations -- Norway, Japan and Iceland -- say the stocks of some whales, especially the small minke whale, have recovered and are plentiful enough for catching.

They harpoon whales despite a ban on commercial whaling imposed by the International Whaling Committee (IWC) nearly 20 years ago. Norway says the whales damage fish stocks, while Japan and Iceland say they hunt them for scientific purposes.

Environmentalists say about 20,000 whales have been harpooned since the moratorium came into effect in 1986 and more than 1,000 would be hunted down this year.

They are also concerned that the three major whaling nations appear to be gaining support in the IWC, the only global body devoted to whales, and that this month's IWC meeting could move toward lifting the ban on whale hunting.

Smaller sea mammals fall prey to fishing, often illegal.

"I once saw dolphins, with heavy weights tied to their tail fins to suffocate them. They were like sea stalagmites," recalled Enzo Maiorca, a 73-year-old former Italian free-diving champion now dedicated to the protection of sea mammals.

This feature and associated material can be found on [www.panda.org](http://www.panda.org)

**WWF-- World Wide Fund For Nature (also known as World Wildlife Fund)**



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Ecologists believe whale-watching, popular in the United States, Australia and New Zealand, not only educates people but can be an alternative way to earn money, providing jobs in villages which traditionally worked in fishing and whaling.

"A live whale is worth much more than a dead whale," said Guglielmi. "We are starting a whale-watching tradition."

One tourist boat which carries about 200 people can earn up to 250,000 euros (\$303,800) in the summer season taking curious holiday-makers to track the whales.

The tourist trips, which in turn increase sea traffic, should be organized according to strict rules to keep disruption to animals to a minimum, says the WWF, a conservation body.

A study on whale behavior off the northwestern U.S. coast showed that since the 1990s, whale-watching boats have increased five-fold while the population of killer whales has dropped.

### **LIGURIAN SANCTUARY**

In 1999, after a decade of lobbying by environmental groups, Italy, France and Monaco signed a treaty establishing the Whale Sanctuary off the Italian and French Rivas.

With its 84,000 square km area and about 1,243 miles of the coast line, it is the biggest protected area in the Mediterranean and the first to include international waters.

Environmentalists who helped to set it up say its ecosystem is unique and offers perfect temperature and nourishment conditions for whales.

A combination of deep water -- down to 9,842 feet close to the coast -- and strong currents that bring nutrients from the sea bottom attract whales and other sea mammals.

Up to 3,500 whales come relatively close to the coast to feed during the summer, and scientists believe the Mediterranean whales stay in the region in winter, moving into the open sea.

The sanctuary gives scientists a chance to study whales in their natural environment and to educate people about them.

It also helps protect sea mammals from threats including fishing, shipping traffic and pollution.

In one of Italy's worst ecological disasters, the Cyprus-registered tanker Haven sank in April 1991, leaking more than 14,000 tonnes of oil into the bay of Genoa.

This is dwarfed by the 635,000 tonnes of oil spilled every year in the Mediterranean -- which accounts for some 25 percent of global oil traffic -- mostly by tankers discharging waste oil to avoid costly and lengthy rinsing in ports, environmentalists say.

Whale protection groups have urged authorities to use new satellite technology which can detect ships discharging oil at sea and impose heavy fines.

Sea tourism, growing every year in the Mediterranean, is also bad news for whales, which risk collisions with fast boats.

If ships and boats were equipped with special echo sounders allowing for horizontal as well as vertical search, many sea mammals could be spared, environmentalists say.

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