

## Guiding on the waves

Deborah Benham tackles the special needs of interpreters on boats.

It's July 2004 and I'm working on my PhD, studying sea otters in California. A friend who runs a local whale watching operation is short of guides and asks if I'll help out. 'Great!' I think, 'free whale watching trips – what could be better?' But hang on a second... I've got to do the guiding... that's actually pretty scary.

When I arrive at the dock it's heaving with expectant people, talking, laughing and peering excitedly over the railing at the sealions circling beneath. There are families with young children, couples, elderly people and enthusiasts with expensive binoculars and cameras. We board and the questions start 'Will we get sick?' 'Where are the toilets?' 'How long until we see the whales?' My stomach tightens as I realise I have to look after these people and keep them entertained for five hours. 'What if we don't even find the whales?', I panic, 'do I have enough to say to keep them all happy? What if the weather gets bad and they're all miserable?' I'm feeling out of my depth already, unsure of what is expected of me or how to address everyone's needs and not wanting to look foolish in front of the skipper. 'God, I wish there'd been some training available' I think to myself as I launch into my ill-prepared commentary.

Like many people who work as marine guides, my background is in science. Initially I had few of the skills needed to interpret the marine environment to a group of holiday makers. My experiences, and those of many others, highlight the need for structured training for marine interpreters. Working in an environment where the main attractions may or may not turn up is challenging. Dealing with people who may be scared, sick, cold or wet is challenging. Trying to inspire people about conservation issues and environmental responsibility is challenging. But these are situations that regularly face marine guides.

Recognising this, the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society (WDCS) is currently developing training for marine guides. The Society is committed to supporting the development of a sustainable, educational whale watching industry which has real conservation benefits. Helping guides to become a more professional and empowered community will lead to higher quality environmental interpretation during whale watching experiences, and hence increase their conservation value. A dedicated naturalist or guide on board can also conduct research and ensure that visitors and boat skippers behave responsibly around the wildlife.

Over the last year I've been investigating what training currently exists for interpreters, tourist guides and specifically, marine interpreters. Although there are plenty of excellent courses available that offer interpretation and guiding skills, there doesn't seem to be much provision for training marine interpreters. What does exist seems mostly to be offered by tour operators and only available to their staff. WDCS plan to

develop a course for people interested in becoming a marine guide, or those wishing to improve their existing skills, so they can become accredited and recognised as high quality marine interpreters.

The initial development of this scheme is taking place in Scotland, where WDCS have a wildlife centre on the Moray Firth employing several volunteers who work as interpreters on shore and on local dolphin watching boats. This pilot scheme is being run in close association with local interpretation experts and tourism training providers to ensure that the course we develop is to a high standard and is recognised by existing training and accreditation bodies. In the years to come we hope to develop the programme further, making it available through our WDCS offices around the world.

When asked why she got into environmental education and interpretation, a colleague of mine replied, 'Most of us just start out passionate about the cause, then we want to share that passion with other people.' That passion is a common theme in WDCS, and through developing better training for marine guides we hope to be better able to share our passion with the rest of the world.

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I said, 'That was a very brave thing to do.' He said, 'Och, it was just the training.' I have a feeling that, in the end, probably that is the answer to a great many things.

*Queen Elizabeth II*