

Is Southern Sri Lanka the world's top spot for seeing blue and sperm whales?



For over a hundred images of whales and dolphins, see <http://www.jetwingeco.com/index.cfm?section=page&id=1066>

South of Dondra in Sri Lanka may turn out to be the best location in the world for seeing blue whales. Furthermore it may also be the best for seeing both blue whales and sperm whales together. This view is based on recent observations and a theory of a migration of whales by marine biologist Charles Anderson. During the season, a Blue Whale is easier to see to the south of Dondra, than a leopard in Yala.

*In April, South of Dondra, we had a one hundred per cent encounter rate for the highly desired but usually difficult, Blue Whale. Both the largest baleen whale and largest toothed whale are within sight of shore. Sri Lanka could be the world's top spot for watching Blue and Sperm Whales together. **Gehan de Silva Wijeyeratne** thinks its time to publicise this internationally. The ascendancy of the Galle-Mirissa coastal strip to being an international hot spot for Blue and Sperm Whales, has just begun. This is the story.*

In April 2008, I was able to see for myself how easy it was to see a Blue Whale in the seas south of the area between Mirissa and Dondra Head. It was easier than seeing a leopard in Yala. I ended April with over a thousand images of Blue and Sperm Whales and Long-snouted Spinner Dolphins, which were good enough to keep. On twenty two whale watching sessions in the first twenty six days of April, Jetwing Lighthouse naturalist Anoma Alagiyawadu saw Blue Whales every time. Seeing a Blue Whale during April seemed to be almost guaranteed. Almost as sure as seeing an elephant in Uda Walawe National Park. Due to the calm seas, between December and April, there is an outstanding window of opportunity for observing Blue Whales and Sperm Whales close to shore. Marine biologist Dr Charles Anderson believes that sightings have peaks in December and April because of a migration of whales.

The Deep South of Sri Lanka may be one of the world's best locations (amongst the top two or three) for watching Blue Whales and Sperm Whales. Two of the most sought after marine mammals. In fact for seeing both Sperm and Blue Whales together, it may even turn out to be the best location in the world. This has not been my discovery. But it has been my privilege to be involved with those who have made this discovery during my own quest to develop whale watching in Sri Lanka. Many people have been involved over three decades in efforts to develop whale watching in Sri Lanka. They could each tell their story from different perspectives. This article is the story from my individual perspective of how Sri Lanka finally acquired the infrastructure and information to become pre-eminent as a whale watching destination.

Whale watching will raise a series of issues for environmentalists, legislators and people in the travel industry. These are best addressed ahead of the next whale watching season. Before I go into this let me first explain how difficult it had been for whale watching to get off the ground. As a nation, Sri Lanka has spent nearly three decades in failed attempts to position itself as a whale watching destination. Much of this was a result of an erroneous assumption that the whale watching had to be undertaken from Trincomalee. Secondly, there was a paucity of data available to help develop whale watching as a commercial activity for tourism. Thirdly, there were no boats suitably kitted out, big enough and powerful enough for leisure activities in the seas. Fourthly, the cost of product development was very high as I discovered when chartering fishing boats for our initial forays out to sea.

The flurry of interest in marine mammals and whale watching began with the arrival of the research vessel the 'Tulip' in the early 1980s. They found Blue Whales close to Trincomalee, something which of course had been known to the locals. But they publicised it locally and internationally. I remember as a teenager attending a public lecture on their work. The Blue and Sperm Whales of Trincomalee featured in the film *Whales Weep Not* produced by James R Donaldson III. He was present when the film was recently more screened at the Galle Literary Festival in January 2008. The Blue Whales of Trincomalee also featured in the second of ten chapters in the book 'On the Trail of the Whale' published in 1994. This book was written by Mark Carwardine, a Briton whose name is synonymous with international whale watching. When I met him in October 2007, I mentioned that Blue Whales were being seen off the southern shores of Sri Lanka. But at this stage, I was still not sure as to how easy and reliable it was.

In 2001, I began asking marine scientists about developing commercial whale watching. A special supplement on Cetaceans by the British magazine 'Bird Watch' in 2001 listed Trincomalee amongst the world's top spots for whale watching. But I knew Trincomalee was not viable. My desire to see and photograph Sri Lankan marine mammals was further stimulated when Rohan Pethiyagoda asked me to proof read Anouk Ilangakoon's book the 'Whales and Dolphins of Sri Lanka' which was published in 2002. However my attempts to go out to sea for whale watching began only in 2003, after listening to a lecture given by Chris and Genevieve Johnson of the research vessel 'Odyssey'. On the 5th June 2003, in the superb monthly lecture series of the Wildlife and Nature Protection Society (WNPS), they gave a lecture illustrated with images and video clips. Listening to them and subsequently having viewed some of their material on the web, I felt that whale sightings were possible anywhere along our coasts. Duncan Murrel, an award winning wildlife photographer was aboard the Odyssey during its Sri Lankan leg. On the 2nd of July 2003, at our invitation, he gave an illustrated talk at the Barefoot Gallery in the Sri Lanka Natural History Society-Barefoot-Jetwing lecture series, further whetting an appetite for whale watching.

Subsequently, I set out to sea from Negombo with Duncan Murrel, a few journalists and a team from the Jetwing Blue Oceanic. We had chartered a fishing boat for the trial run. We saw nothing. Gazing out to the featureless open sea I realised it was like searching for a needle in a haystack. In August 2003, Sunela Jayawardene, the architect of Vil Uyana, went with Jetwing Naturalist Chandra Jayawardana to look for whales off Kirinda, and came away with nothing. A few years later I tried again with my team and I managed to see just two dolphins. Our wildlife watching out at sea with clients also produced no whales. It seemed like a hopeless task.

In August 2003 I was at the British Birdwatching Fair where I discussed with Charles Anderson how we could combine leopard safaris with whale watching in the Maldives. With regard to Sri Lanka, I felt that we had to wait until someone independently came up with the required infrastructure of boats suitably kitted out and fast enough for whale watching. Meanwhile, the time and energy of the Jetwing Eco Holidays turned to branding Sri Lanka for The Gathering of elephants, Butterflies and Dragonflies and other eco-tourism products where the cost of product development was modest and much of the infrastructure was in place. The one notable gap in infrastructure was the field skills. We focused on filling the gap.

However, my collection of books and papers on marine mammals grew steadily. Over the next few years we discussed whale watching on and off when we met at the British Birdwatching Fair. Charles was developing a theory that there was migration of whales between the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea which took them near the shores of Sri Lanka. He believed that the whales, especially Blue Whales and Sperm Whales, will be travelling past the south coast in January from the Arabian Sea to the Bay of Bengal. In April, they would pass the south coast on the return journey travelling west to the Arabian Sea passing Sri Lanka and the

Maldives. He had first suggested this theory in a paper published in 1999 which reviewed strandings in the Maldives. Having reviewed his records up to mid 2002, a total of over two thousand sightings, he refined his hypothesis further in a paper published in 2005 in the 'Journal of Cetacean Research and Management'.

One of the key catalysts of the development of whale watching off the Southern coast was the involvement of Simon Scarff and Sue Evans with Mirissa Water Sports. Mirissa Watersports was set up in December 2005 with assistance from the Building a Future Foundation (www.bafilk.org) to help tsunami affected youth. Twelve youth were given the use of the 'Spirit of Dondra', a 54 foot boat, fitted out for recreational activity. They were to operate as a partnership and run a commercial enterprise. Sue Evans' a sailor and her husband Simon Scarff' an angler were asked to help voluntarily with English, marketing and skills development.

On 11th April 2006 Simon Scarff was training the crew in sport fishing when he photographed some whales south of Dondra Head. These were identified as Blue Whales by Anouk Ilangakoon. Simon's article was published in the March, April & May 2006 issue of the Sri Lanka Wildlife eNewsletter which is compiled by me (see www.jetwingeco.com for past copies). Charles Anderson who read this began a dialogue with Sue Evans who had already advised the crew to maintain log of sightings.

The stream of sightings by Mirissa Water Sports communicated by Sue suggested to Charles more evidence for his theory of a migration of whales which could be seen from the southern coast. In April 2007 Charles Anderson climbed to the top of Dondra Lighthouse to look for Blue Whales. Charles had decided on Dondra Head because here the continental shelf is at its narrowest with the one kilometer depth being encountered a mere six kilometers out. Elsewhere in the southern half of the island it is between four to five times that distance to where the continental shelf ends abruptly and the 200 meter depth contour (200m isobath) plunges to a kilometer or more (see Chart No 813 published by the British Hydrographic Office).

On his second visit with Anoma Algaiyawadu to the Dondra Lighthouse, Charles and Anoma phoned me within fifteen minutes to say that they had seen the first Blue Whale. I was excited that it had been so easy and realised that this was another significant moment in the development of whale watching. I wished I could have joined them but I was busy with preparations for an overseas business visit. They also went out to sea thrice with the Mirissa Watersports Club and had good sightings of Blue Whales as well as Sperm Whales which Charles had hoped to find. The presence of Sperm Whales under such salubrious viewing conditions is also of international significance. It was when I spent time on the boat with Charles that I realised fully how significant Sri Lanka could be for whale watching. We may well be in the top spot for those seeking Blue and Sperm Whales.

Sri Lankan waters are very rich in cetacean species with twenty seven species being recorded to date. One hundred and five river systems contribute a steady nutrient flow to the ocean. This together with upwelling at the edge of the continental shelf create ideal conditions to support a food chain all year round in the warm tropical waters. However, to see marine mammals, location and time is all important. With Trincomalee out of bounds, I had been simply taking pot shots in the dark. Charles with his experience carefully worked out when and where to see them. He realised that they were unlikely to migrate passing the north of Sri Lanka because the Palk Strait was not deep enough. The Admiralty charts showed that near Dondra Head would be the ideal location in which to search for them. Charles had hoped to visit in 2005 to test his hypothesis but his visit was put off due to the Boxing Day Tsunami of 26th December 2004. Nevertheless, his hypothesis seems to have received the first confirmation from the observations of Simon, Sue and the Mirissa Water Sports boat crew starting in April 2006.

Charles Anderson is quick to point out that much more work has to be done before the hypothesis can be taken as confirmed. Mirissa Water Sports have consistently seen whales from mid December 2007 to mid April 2008. Until a more detailed and longer census is conducted using standard scientific techniques, any spikes in the number of whales due to a migration may not show up. It is possible that there is a resident population always present which will result in sightings whenever conditions are good to go out whale watching. I was out on the 1st of April as well as on the 26th April, when the Spirit of Dondra did its last whale watching run for the season. I noticed a distinct tailing off in the sightings of Blue Whales which supports the theory of migratory spikes.

December to February are extremely busy months for the Jetwing Eco Holidays team and I had vowed to turn my attention to whale watching in earnest in April 2008, when Charles was scheduled to return. The charter of a boat is expensive. But Jetwing nevertheless needed more data to complement the three seasons of data already published by Mirissa Water Sports, before we plunged in. In January 2008, I had a meeting with Anoma and the General Manager and suggested that we place a whale watching flyer in every one of the 63 rooms in Jetwing Lighthouse. This was easy to do as Sue Anderson had helped Anoma to prepare a whale watching flyer the previous April. No one who stayed at the hotel would fail to see that whale watching was on offer. Our guests would benefit from a fantastic experience and I would get more valuable data to assess how feasible and successful whale watching is from the south. The Galle Literary Festival was starting in mid January and as agreed the flyers were in each room by then.

In April 2008, whale watching was bubbling. Walkers Tours, of the John Keells group of companies, held a press conference announcing a tie up with the Ceylon Fishery Harbours Corporation and the use of their vessels for whale watching. This was good news as more infrastructure had become available for developing whale watching. Colombo circles were agog with the news of large pods of dolphins in the hundreds, off Kalpitiya. Meanwhile, from December 2007 there were steady sightings of Blue Whales and Sperm Whales logged by Mirissa Watersports adding to three seasons of data.

It was time to get stuck into developing and marketing whale watching and in April 2008, I set off from Mirissa Harbour with Mirissa Water Sports, Sue Evans, Simon Scarff, Anoma Alagiyawadu and a team of naturalists from Jetwing Eco Holidays. We had travelled for around forty minutes when Sue Evans pointed out the first blow of a Blue Whale. We also had at least five Sperm Whales. A few days later, with the same group, we encountered around five Blue Whales in an area of less than 3 kilometre by kilometre square. This must be one of the highest densities in which Blue Whales can be seen anywhere in the world. With Deepika Kumari of Lodestar who is assisting Mirissa Water Sports with the handling of bookings, we had a discussion at Sue's home with the youth from Mirissa Water Sports. We discussed how we could work together on marketing the whale watching and disseminating information on the discovery of one of the world's best locations for Blue and Sperm Whales. Besides web based activities, we promised to include whales in two forthcoming publications. A new edition of a book on national park and reserves and another on wildlife itineraries. I also promised to bring local and international press from print and TV, a formula which had worked well with other eco-tourism products such as leopard safaris.

A couple of weeks later I was on the boat with Charles Anderson and two of his American clients Corey and Diane Rusk who travel around the world photographing whales. They were on a 14 day whale watching tour. This was probably the first true whale watching tour to Sri Lanka dedicated to clients. The clients had come specifically to photograph Sperm Whales. One morning we steamed past no less than five Blue Whales in search of Sperm Whales. On the horizon we saw the short bushy, angled blow of a Sperm Whale. Behind it outlined against a tanker was the more powerful, towering, vertical blow of a Blue Whale. I could also see a pod of Long-snouted Spinner Dolphins. Two of the world's most sought after marine mammals and a pod of dolphins all in the field of view at the same time. What an incredible experience.

My time on the boat with the Mirissa Water Sports crew, Sue Evans, Simon Scarff, Anoma Alagiyawadu and Charles Anderson have left me in no doubt how easy and how fantastic the whale watching is off Southern Sri Lanka. On April 26th 2008, I did the second of two filming sessions with Art TV. Anoma had been out to sea twenty two times that April and he had seen a Blue Whale on every single visit. It was a hundred per cent strike rate for the person who has probably engaged in more commercial whale watching sessions in Sri Lanka (besides of course the crew of the boat). Several whale watching sessions, Anoma's strike rate in April, a lot of background reading, and especially the migration theory and conversations with Charles left me in no doubt that South of Dondra was a whale watching hot spot. I had to publicise this internationally. It was ironical that Sri Lankans had been travelling to Alaska and South Africa to whale watch. This, when possibly the top spot in the world to see the largest baleen whale and toothed whale was a short distance away from the enchanting villas and boutique hotels of the Southern Riviera of Sri Lanka. What is needed now is a bigger burst of publicity, locally and overseas.

The publicity does have a down-side and it is good that it is coming at the tail end of the December to January season. Next season there could be mad rush to book boats for whale watching. As of April 2008, there was only one boat operating from Mirissa suitably kitted for tourists. One of the reasons why Mirissa is so

good for whale watching is because the continental shelf is at its closest near Mirissa and Dondra. The ease of access to the whales means next season there could be a number of sixteen footer boats all thundering out to sea for whale watching.

Whale watching will present environmentalists, regulators and the tourism industry with two main issues to address. Parallel in importance will be the safety of the tourists and the welfare of the whales. The issue of safety will be easier to address as licensed tour operators and hoteliers will wish to ensure that client safety is paramount. Boats taking clients out should have experienced crews who will not take undue risks, mobile phones or radio communication for communicating in emergencies, life jackets, an adequate stock of fresh water, GPS navigation equipment etc. In time, the better operated boats will carry equipment which send out distress signals which automatically activate if a boat overturns.

A fair amount of education and persuasion will be required to ensure the welfare of the animals. On one trip we saw around ten Blue Whales and fifteen Sperm Whales in an area which was approximately 7 km by 7 km square. There are enough whales during the season for boats to spread around without having to crowd around a single animal. But would a situation arise where we see a swarm of twenty plus boats surrounding a single Blue Whale? Once when I was with Charles we encountered a pod of an estimated 12 Sperm Whales. One cannot but worry about a bevy of sixteen footer boats racing around and through a pod of whales and creating stress amongst such intelligent animals.

Parallel problems had arisen with vehicles congregating around a leopard in Yala or during The Gathering of Elephants in Minneriya. But through education, I have also seen vehicles being managed in a way that the animals are left un-disturbed so that many visitors can enjoy a good sighting. I once observed a leopard cub sleeping for three hours whilst seventeen vehicles lay parked beneath it without disturbing it. Similarly in Minneriya I have on many occasions observed the staff of the Department of Wildlife Conservation arranging vehicles in a long drawn out line to avoid disturbing the families of elephants coming to water. There are parallels to watching whales and leopards. If you keep your distance, you will enjoy a much better and longer sighting. Sometimes a Blue Whale or Sperm Whale will swim close to a boat if you put your boat on neutral two hundred meters away and let it chose to swim past you. The technique which works with curious leopard sub-adults works with whales as well.

With whale watching, tour operators and hoteliers will need to insist that boat crews do not rush up to animals and create stress. As the whale watching industry booms, NGOs and others will inevitably be drawn into educating local boat crews on how to manage whale sightings intelligently so that tourists have a longer sighting and the animal is not stressed. Mirissa Water Sports has already benefited from the expertise of local cetacean expert Anouk Illangakoon. Besides help in identification of photographs, she has spent time on an on-shore training session with the crew to train them on scientific and environmental aspects of whale watching. One drawback of whale watching is that unlike in many national parks and certain reserves, a guide from a state agency will not be mandatory. Any fisherman or boat crew could take people out. So there will be a greater onus on the tourism industry to engage in responsible tourism.

The strip from Galle to Mirissa could in the years to come, become one of the most important coastal strips internationally for whale watching. Occupancy in hotels in this stretch could be significantly boosted by the inclusion of whale watching excursions during the season. I suspect more than ninety nine percent of the whale watching will be by people simply taking a one off excursion. It will be no different to visiting Pinnawela or going on a single game drive in Yala. The special interest travelers with an interest in marine mammals booking between five to ten marine mammal watching trips will be a minority. Unlike birds, butterflies or dragonflies, whale watching for the majority of tourists will not require specialist guides. It therefore has enormous potential for creating income and livelihoods for a wide swathe of people. But it will have to be managed by the state and private sector so that the welfare of whales is not compromised.

Marine mammals are presently protected by law although smaller animals are killed and cut up on-board to reduce the risk of detection. The economic benefits of whale watching will strengthen the case for their conservation. There will be peer pressure not to kill animals which are generating income and employment. Since 1979 the entire Indian Ocean north of latitude 55 South has been declared a sanctuary by the International Whaling Commission. The economics of whale watching will further the resolve of Indian Ocean nations not to yield to pressure to resume commercial whaling.

Marine mammals researchers could also benefit from the growth of whale watching by acting as on-board guides cum researchers. Chartering boats for research is expensive and Dr Charles Anderson is a good example of a researcher who has capitalised on the public interest to fund his research. He set up a whale watching company so that clients pay for the time he needs to spend at sea collecting data. He is honest about the fact that he is collecting data but judiciously manages the expectations of his clients whilst collecting data. Not all researchers need to go to the extent of setting up a whale watching company. There will be hotels and tour operators who will be happy to have a researcher cum expert guide accompanying their clients. Under the Jetwing research Initiative the Jetwing Lighthouse Hotel has supported the observational work of Dr Charles Anderson. He is one of the most experienced cetacean researchers in the Indian Ocean and brings with him a unique blend of researcher and whale watching tour operator. In his view, Sri Lanka surpasses even the Maldives for the likelihood of success of seeing Blue Whales and Sperm Whales. Those Sri Lankan scientists who are as street savvy as their foreign counterparts can also harness the support and goodwill of the private sector for their research. In March 2008, the magazine 'Explore Sri Lanka' carried an article on the past efforts and future aspirations of the Ceylon Fishery Harbour Corporation (CFHC). It is clear that they intend to play a significant role in developing whale watching by building on their past efforts. They also intend to play a pivotal role in facilitating research by taking researchers on-board.

One of the most important resources for deep south tourism in Sri Lanka lies a few kilometers offshore, the Blue Whales, surfacing every twelve to fifteen minutes for a breath of air. Finally, everything has fallen into place. The infrastructure of suitable boats and the all important know how is finally in place. There cannot be a better location for those fleeing the northern winter to go whale watching. The South of Sri Lanka is blessed with beautiful beaches, snorkelling and some of the best boutique hotels and villas in the world. I now have the confidence and over a thousand cetacean images to work with the Jetwing Eco Holidays team to crank out the publicity.

Kaikoura in New Zealand has over thirty thousand whale watchers visiting it annually for Sperm Whales. The Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society (www.wdcs.org) estimates that ten million people go whale watching every year. Sri Lanka could one day attract several hundred whale watchers on bespoke tours and several thousand could be taking one off excursions. It may turn out that Sri Lanka is the most reliable and easiest location in which to see the Blue Whale, the largest animal that has ever inhabited this planet. Sri Lanka may turn out to be the top location for seeing both Blue and Sperm Whales. Besides more tourists, Sri Lanka will also gain from positive publicity overseas. The success of whale watching will be closely parallel the development of pelagic cruises for seabird watching. This will also contribute a wealth of ornithological data. At present most Sri Lankan birders have not seen a Pomarine Skua. One morning we saw over forty. The development of pelagic cruises for seabird watching will have to be another story.