

The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Marine-Wildlife Tourism in Massachusetts, United States

Authors : K. C. Bloom, Cynde McInnis

Abstract : The Covid-19 pandemic has caused immense changes in the way that we live, work and travel. The impact of these changes is readily apparent in tourism to Massachusetts and the region of New England. Whereas, in general, Massachusetts and New England are a hotspot for travelers from around the world, this form of travel has largely been shut down due to the pandemic. One such area where the impact has been felt is in marine-based wildlife tourism. Massachusetts is home to not only whales but also seals and great white sharks. Prior to the pandemic, whale watching had long been a popular activity while seal and shark tourism has been a developing one. Given that seeing a great white shark was rare in New England for many years, shark tourism has not played a role in the economies of the region until recently. While whales have steadily been found within the marine environments of Massachusetts and whale watching has been a popular attraction since the mid-1970s, the lack of great white sharks in New England was, in part, a response to a change in their environment in that a favorite food source, the gray seals, were culled by regional fishermen as the fishermen believed that seals were taking their catch. This retaliatory behavior ended when the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 (MMPA) was passed. The MMPA prohibited the killing of seals and since then the seal population has increased to traditional numbers (Tech Times, 2014). Given the increase in the seal population in New England, and especially Cape Cod, Massachusetts, there has been a similar increase in the numbers of great white sharks. In fact, over the time between 2004 and 2014, the number of sightings increased from an average of two per year to more than 20 (NY Post, 7/21/14). This has increased even more over the last six years. As a result, residents and businesses in Massachusetts have begun to embrace the great whites as a potential tourism draw. Local business owners are considering opening up cage diving and shark viewing businesses while there has also been an increase in shark-related merchandise throughout the Cape Cod region. Combined with a large whale watching industry, marine-based wildlife tourism is big business to Massachusetts. With the Covid-19 pandemic shuttering international travel, this study aims to look at the impacts of the pandemic on this industry. Through interviews with marine-based wildlife tourism businesses as well as survey data collection from visitors, this study looks at the holistic impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on an important part of the marine tourism industry in the state.

Keywords : marine tourism, ecotourism, Covid, wildlife

Conference Title : ICCMT 2022 : International Conference on Coastal and Marine Tourism

Conference Location : Rome, Italy

Conference Dates : May 05-06, 2022