

NEW WHALE SIGHTINGS COULD OPEN UP NEW TOURISM INDUSTRY IN SOUTHERN CHILE

Contributed by Natalie Muller
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The Southern Right Whale has been spotted in Chile's Austral waters.

Photo courtesy of Flickr, Turkinator

Biologists in recent months have been surprised to discover that the Southern Right Whale, which previously had been sighted only in Argentine waters, is venturing into the Magellan Strait just off of Punta Arenas in Chile's Region XII. If this trend lasts, it could boost tourism in the area.

Researchers in the area recorded 20 Southern Right Whales in the eastern mouth of the Magellan Strait – a significant amount, considering that two or three are spotted off the coast of Central Chile each year.

Until now, the Magellan Strait had been solely populated by the Humpback Whale, especially in the area surrounding Carlos III Island in the Francisco Coloane Aquatic Reserve, located 200 kilometers south-east of Punta Arenas. The Southern Right Whale hails from the Atlantic, and has always been sighted in Argentine waters off the Valdes Peninsula.

Marine biologists Carlos Olavarria (from the Quaternary Study Center) and Jorge Gibbons (from the Patagonia Institute at the Universidad de Magellan) have been monitoring the whale population off Punta Arenas in an effort to recuperate their population in southern Chile.

“It is relatively easy to see them,” said Olavarria. “When I was in the area in May and June I saw quite a lot of them. The challenge for tourists is arriving there in the middle of the Patagonian winter.”

According to Gibbons, organizing whale watching tours for the Southern Right Whale would be easier and cheaper than for the Humpback, mainly because Humpback-watching requires a boat trip, while Southern Right-watching can be done from the shore.

“They could do tourism here by providing easy access to the viewing points on the coast for a price,” said Gibbons.

Researchers say the Southern Right Whale is finally recovering after experiencing a brutal history of commercial whaling dating back since the beginning of the 20th century.

“We have recorded their presence in the Magellan Strait with 69 sightings since 1985,” said Olavarria. The biologists compared their findings with reports from workers at Chile's National Oil Company (ENAP) plants in Posesion and San Gregorio. The workers had been spotting whales for some time, but were unable to identify the species.

Until now, all Southern Right Whale sightings in this region had been made from land. They are easy to spot, given that they never travel more than 10 meters below the ocean surface and often come as close as 10 meters to the shoreline.

Although the reappearance of these giants in the Magellan Strait could be a sign that their population is recuperating, they are still considered an endangered species. In 2008, 19,000 whales were reported in the Southern Hemisphere, and an estimated 100 still exist between Chile's southern waters and Peru.

SOURCE: EL MERCURIO

By Natalie Muller