



The Importance of Public Engagement Within an Island Community

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1. Introduction

Manx Whale and Dolphin Watch (MWDW) is a research and outreach charity based on the Isle of Man (British Isles). The island is 30 x 15 miles with a coastline of 95 miles and a population of 85,000.

MWDW was founded in 2006, and almost no historical records of cetaceans exist for Isle of Man (Manx) waters prior to this. A former basking shark hot-spot, the island's community took many years of convincing that we can also see five key species of cetacean and that the majority of our sightings are within three miles of the coast.

During our first six years of study, we threw ourselves into data collection and analysis. The Outreach and Education Department followed in 2012 and we worked hard to engage the public via social media, press releases, and outreach events. However, we continued to hit the same stumbling blocks as the majority of the public simply did not believe that we could see cetaceans around our island.

Commonly asked questions whilst conducting land-based surveys pre 2019:



- “What time are you expecting the basking sharks?”
- “Are you artists?”
- “What do you do all day, sit around and sunbathe?”
- When pointing out a pod of dolphins, “that’s nice, but have you seen any basking sharks?”

We always said that only once the Manx community see cetaceans as ‘their own’, to monitor and protect, will we truly be able to make a difference. It was clear that we needed to place cetaceans under the local spotlight. We needed a public base. We needed a Visitor Centre.

2. Developing our Visitor Centre

The idea of opening some kind of centre had been brewing for a couple of years. My background in Environmental Education equipped me with ideas of what might work.

In 2018, a small shop became available to rent on the shopping street of the coastal town from which we operate. We signed a yearly lease and moved our equipment into this empty shop. We started by thinking of the key points we wanted to achieve:

1. Display boards would detail our local species and where/when to see them.
2. People can report and view recent sightings.
3. It would become our HQ, allowing public to see marine mammal scientists at work.
4. There would be a Young Scientists Area



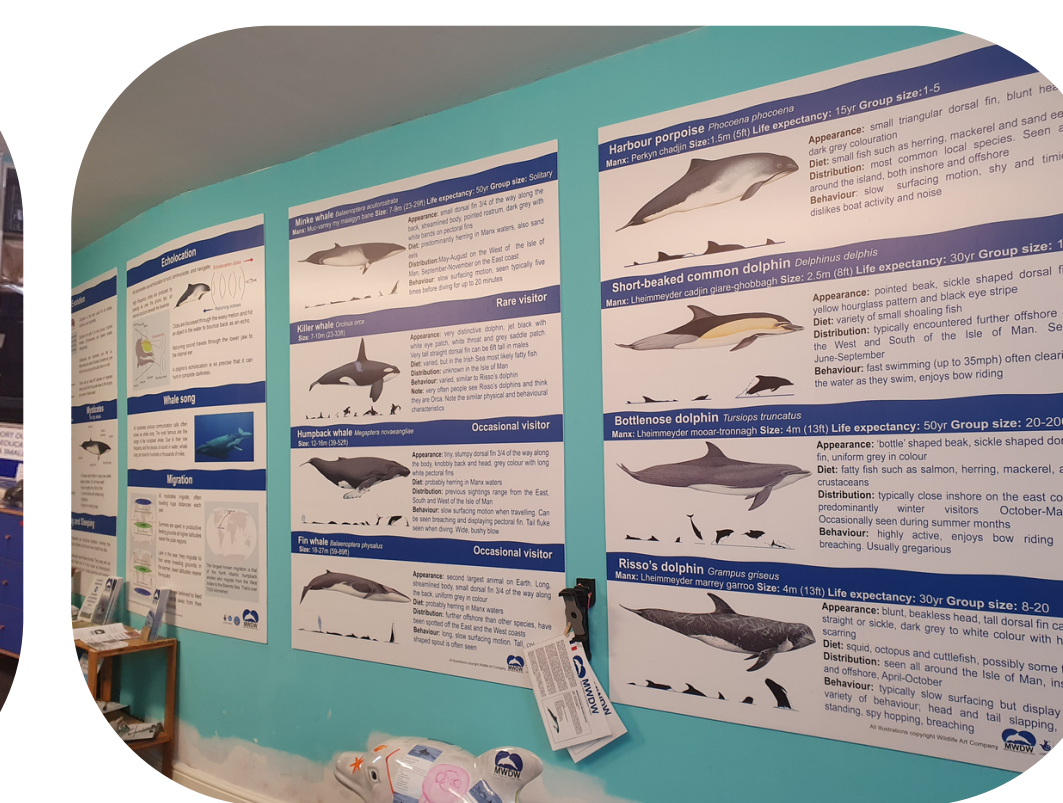
A blank canvas



Present day



A look inside



Display panels

3. Current Offering

- Recent sightings stream from website to screen in window
- Information about local species and where to see them
- Displays on cetacean biology and anatomy
- Library of books and research papers
- Sound files and interactive quizzes on a tablet
- ‘Mini museum’ selection of bones
- Young Scientist’s Area with drop in activities and bookable workshops
- Merchandise
- Refreshments in return for a donation
- Office space and storage for survey equipment
- Whale School- Mini marine biologist sessions for local kids
- Ocean Crafts- sessions using recycled materials

4. How Is It Funded



Whale School ‘Photographing Fins’ session

- An initial grant was obtained from our local Lottery Trust to pay for displays, signage, and first six months of rent
- 95% of furniture and office equipment was donated to us via social media, and school/office clearances
- Broadband and phone line paid for by local telecoms provider
- Ongoing rent sponsored by local companies in return for advertising

5. What difference has the Visitor Centre made?

Average 500 visitors per year

Increase in:

- Awareness of local species
- Sighting reports
- Enthusiasm for the cause
- Accountability for actions
- Desire to protect local marine species
- The Visitor Centre has resulted in a direct increase in public knowledge of local marine species. This in turn, has led to a busy public sightings network with an average of 350 confirmed opportunistic reports per year with total number of observers trebling this.
- MWDW has become a recognised local name
- We are now seeing an urgency within our community to protect our local marine ecosystem
- The island becoming recognised as a cetacean hot-spot for wildlife enthusiasts. Birth of local eco-tourism. MWDW continue to work alongside boat tour operators to issue best practise guidelines



6. Reach out and engage with your community

Only once a local community see cetaceans as ‘their own’ to monitor and protect, will our research truly make a difference.

- Find a public space to rent. This could be a year round shop space, seasonal pop-up or an area within a larger space (e.g shopping centre or tourist attraction)
- Turn it into your headquarters. Allow public to see marine mammal scientists at work, entering and analysing data.
- Transform the public area into a welcoming hub with information boards
- Allow people to connect with your work
- Keep it simple, cheap to maintain, man it with volunteers, run drop-in days and activities for children.
- Engage with your local tourist board and media companies
- Seek rental costs from local companies in return for advertising.

I am happy to offer advice and ideas. Please reach out to me via any means.