

Unique trail to promote Scotland as top whale-watching destination

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Individuals, communities and businesses are being asked to contribute ideas for top sites for spotting whales, dolphins and porpoises from land on Scotland's west coast, to help create a Hebridean Whale Trail that will be the first of its kind in the UK.

The high-profile trail will be a network of around 25 world-class whale-watching and whale heritage sites. Its development is being led by charity Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust.

The project will promote Scotland as one of Europe's best destinations for spotting whales, dolphins and porpoises – collectively known as cetaceans – and champion conservation of the Hebrides' unique, globally important marine wildlife and environment.

Due for a summer 2019 launch, the ambitious initiative will connect and support existing wildlife tourism businesses and heritage sites of national cultural significance that showcase the history of people's relationships with whales in the Hebrides. Many of these will be small, community-run visitor centres at spectacular sites.

"People currently visit Scotland for the landscapes, wildlife and culture – but not necessarily to see cetaceans. With the Hebrides being one of the best places in Europe to see these spectacular animals, we want to add them to the mix – and our research shows that the potential is huge," said Karl Stevens, Hebridean Whale Trail Manager.

"We're keen to hear from local people, communities and businesses for their ideas and suggestions – to ensure the Hebridean Whale Trail embodies the spirit of the Hebrides, and places Scotland's land-based whale watching opportunities on the international map."

Scotland's west coast offers excellent opportunities for accessible, land-based whale watching, with a remarkable range of species to be spotted. The region's seas are home to around a quarter of the world's whale and dolphin species – including bottlenose, Risso's and common dolphins, harbour porpoises, minke whales and Orca.

David Adams McGilp, VisitScotland Regional Partnerships Director, said: "Scotland is renowned for its outstanding beauty and our natural environment is one of the top reasons people choose to visit. This new Whale Trail will help cement Scotland's reputation as one of the best places in the Europe to watch marine life, and provides a platform for local communities to come together and promote everything that makes the Hebrides such a unique and special place.

"With figures suggesting nature-based activities are worth nearly 40% of all tourism spending in Scotland, our natural heritage is certainly an important asset when attracting visitors."

Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust will be planning and developing the project over the next year, identifying potential sites for inclusion on the trail in close collaboration with individuals, communities, site owners, conservation organisations, schools, local businesses, visitor centres and tour operators.

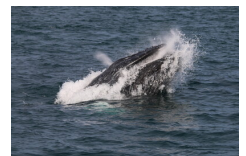
The trust hopes to identify sites from the Clyde in the south to Cape Wrath in the far north, and as far west as St Kilda. There will be a variety of locations from remote and dramatic headlands and sea lochs, white sandy beaches, and bustling harbours.

The trail will have a dedicated website with suggested routes, transport options and site details, with visitors able to share experiences by uploading photos.

There will be on-site interpretation at suitable locations, explaining which species are likely to be seen and describing the heritage of particular sites.

Activities will support local economic growth and job creation, promoting land-based whale-watching as a sustainable and accessible activity. The project aims to help communities – particularly in remote areas where visitor numbers or facilities can't support boat-based whale-watching businesses – to generate an income from their local natural heritage.

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Events, workshops and school field trips will raise awareness about cetaceans, while volunteers will be able to be trained how to responsibly watch, identify and record marine wildlife. Wildlife tour businesses and community groups setting up trips that incorporate nearby whale trail locations will be offered expert advice, training and information materials.

Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust is based on the Isle of Mull. The charity has been taking action for the conservation of whales, dolphins and porpoises off western Scotland for over two decades. Its research – primarily conducted from its specialised research yacht Silurian – has advanced understanding of species that visit or are resident in The Hebrides.

The Hebridean Whale Trail project has been possible by a grant of £175,000 from the UK Government-funded Coastal Communities Fund, which is delivered by The Big Lottery Fund. The Coastal Communities Fund encourages the economic development of UK coastal communities by giving funding to create sustainable economic growth and jobs.

Individuals, community groups and businesses wanting to get involved with the Hebridean Whale Trail or suggest sites for inclusion can visit Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust's website at www.hwdt.org, where you can also submit ideas, photos and anecdotes about Scotland's cetacean heritage.

Ends

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