



COURTESY OCC

Whale-Watching as a Community Resource

Whaling fleets navigated the seas from the 1600s until the 1950s, stalking the enormous beasts for their meat, bones and especially their oil. The blubber bonanza provided fuel for city street lamps during the 19th century and lubricated the machinery of the industrial revolution, and the fleets' owners amassed huge fortunes. Demand for whale products waned with the advent of mineral and vegetable substitutes, but the damage had been done. Whale populations were decimated. The International Whaling Commission was formed in 1946 to manage the seriously depleted stocks; 40 years later it imposed a moratorium on hunting the giants of the sea. Current populations of eight out of the 11 whale species that had been hunted to the brink of extinction remain dangerously low but show signs of recovery.

Today more people would rather observe whales in their natural habitat than buy products derived from them. Whale-watching generates some \$2 billion annually and employs upwards of 13,000 individuals around the globe. **Organización para la Conservación de Cetáceos** (OCC) is betting on the Southern right whale to boost economic development in the department of Rocha. From early July through November, the austral winter and spring, these whales pass through the waters off Rocha as they make their way from the calving grounds off the Brazilian coast to their feeding grounds in the freezing waters of the Antarctic. In the course of this migration, they may elevate their flukes, or tailfins, to catch the wind for propulsion, a unique and fascinating maneuver known as sailing and still not fully understood by experts in cetaceans. Rocha stands in rustic contrast to the luxury hotels and chic restaurants catering to the jet-set that flocks to Punta del Este in the summer. But in recent years, the number of visitors attracted to Rocha has skyrocketed and so has pressure to build infrastructure that residents fear will only benefit the developers and industrialists.

OCC will use its IAF grant to work with three Rocha communities to identify alternatives that will assure a responsible approach to tourism and to determine the feasibility of forming local *grupos motores*, or boards representing the interests of civil society, government, businesses and residents. It plans to provide training and technical assistance to start-up businesses offering visitors opportunities to observe the whales as well as ride horses and hike. Workshops and activities planned for schools will cover conservation, marine ecosystems, water management, waste recycling and renewable energy technology. The goal is to develop a vibrant network of *rochenses* interested in tourism that safeguards the environment and benefits the entire community.—*Eduardo Rodríguez-Frías, contributing editor*