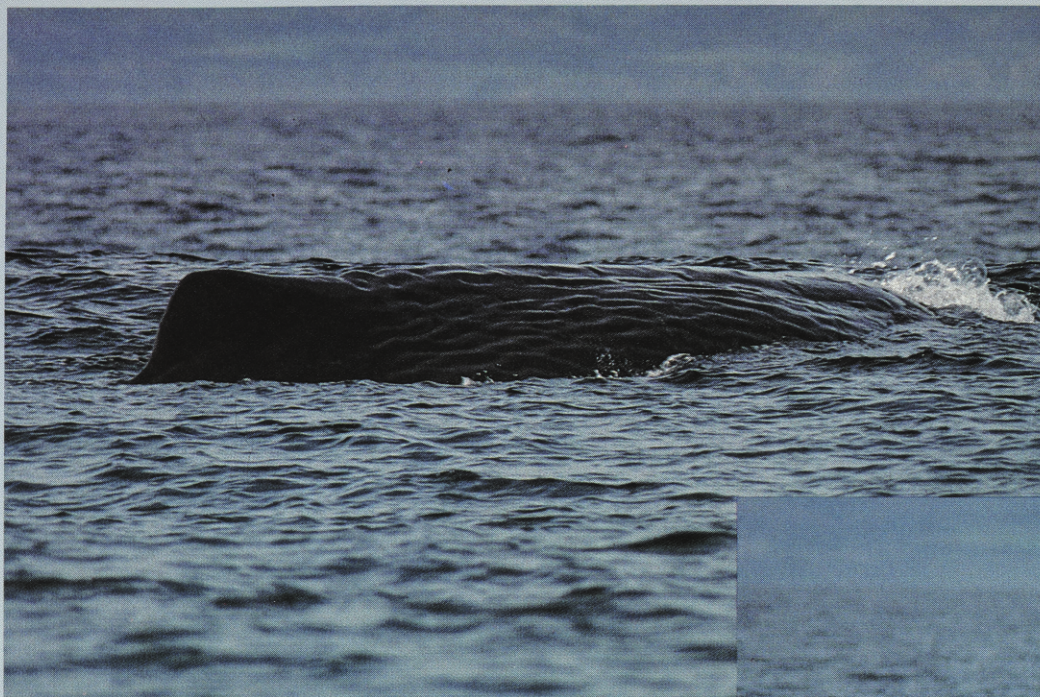


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At Kaikoura people have swapped harpoons for cameras in the modern hunt for whales.

NOTHING QUITE PREPARES YOU for the ride out to view the sperm whales at Kaikoura, despite the operator's prior caution that it will be a hybrid of speedboating and white water rafting.

In seconds one is propelled to a near airborne attitude as the rubber-pontooned vessel speeds out to its appointment with the whales. After ten minutes at high velocity on a cool winter's morning, a form of lockjaw settles in, making communication with fellow whale watchers impossible. Fortunately this particular morning the sun breaks clear of the cloud to allow myself and fellow tourists to warm up.

This is eco-tourism, 1990s-style and whale watching is a high technology business. One of our guides from Kaikoura Tours Ltd, a marae-based venture, informs us that the twin-engined outboard vessel is the fastest passenger boat on the water.

It soon becomes apparent why the speed is required. For an hour we wait patiently for the whales to appear, monitoring their progress underwater with the aid of a hydrophone which picks up the sonic clicks they use to locate their prey. As soon as a telltale 3-metre high plume is spotted about half a kilometre away, we are treated to another rollicking sprint across the ocean. But within 30 seconds of our arrival the sperm whale heaves its tail flukes in the air, the signal that it is about to dive under for a further hour or so. This particular whale has been "spooked" by the presence of the whale watching boats, the guides suggest. It is presumed that it is a recent arrival to the herd that winters off the Kaikoura coast and is unaccustomed to human attention.

No such inhibitions concern Hoon, the darling of the whale watching set. Those fortunate enough to see Hoon are spoiled with up to 15 minutes of whale frolicking. At

times the 15-metre, 50-tonne leviathan has been known to dive under the watching boats. However, this morning Hoon fails to make an appearance. In fact, despite a further two brief sightings, the whales stay out of sight.

However, that afternoon and the following day they are more obliging and whale tourists are treated to numerous and lengthy sightings.

Kaikoura is one of the best locations in the world to view whales, especially sperm whales. Almost nowhere else do large sperm whales routinely come so close to shore. The Kaikoura population is comprised of only adolescent males and the attraction is their prey – giant squid which live deep down in the Hikurangi Trough, the southern extent of which ends near Kaikoura. At depths of more than 1000 metres the whales and squid engage in titanic battles, evidence of which can be seen in the occasional squid sucker marks on the whales.

But it is the dusky dolphins which are the highlight of my trip, and conversations with other whale watchers reveal that the dolphin encounters are the most enjoyable. It is the different natures of the mammals: the whales, huge and remote, the dolphins cu-

rious and playful, revelling in their acrobatic performances. To the onlooker there seems no doubt that the dolphins do cartwheels or backward flips for the delight of humans; the humans respond with appropriate "oohs" and "aahs", encouraging the cetaceans to perform even more outrageously.

Less than 30 years ago at Kaikoura humans were still chasing whales with harpoons rather than pursuing them with cameras. Today whale watching is one of the factors that has changed Kaikoura from being a sleepy stop-off en route to Christchurch or