



The attractions of whale watching trips are not confined to whales: the waters around Kaikoura are rich with bird life such as the cape pigeon (top) and Buller's mollymawk (bottom).

Photos: Craig Potton



Kaikoura, meaning "to eat crayfish", has always been an important centre of Maori culture. In turn the Waitaha, Ngati Mamoe and Ngai Tahu occupied the district, and the peninsula was studded with pa sites. In 1828 Te Rauparaha carried out an infamous invasion of the peninsula from Kapiti Island, killing 1400 people before returning home.

Today, Maori are still present and partially thanks to whale watching the local iwi, Ngati Kuri, of the Ngai Tahu tribe, are experiencing a renaissance. Two years ago they set up Kaikoura Tours Ltd with one boat. Today they run two boats and employ about 20 full and part time staff. The company has taken over the old railway station where they run a tea-rooms and souvenir shop.

Luke Clayton, who works in the shop, says the venture has lifted the pride of his people.

"The reason we set the company up was to look after our unemployed. The young ones were moving away," he says.

He notes that overseas tourists are particularly interested in the Kaikoura Tours operation because they are seeking a uniquely indigenous experience.

He says that so far sperm, fin, pilot and orca whales have been seen. The fin, the second largest whale, "was a real bonus. But we would love to see the blue."

The local youth hostel is enjoying a mini-boom, with the number of people staying up 100 percent from three years ago. Manageress Clare Matthews says the hostel may have to add more rooms if the demand increases. She notices that people are now staying for two to three days rather than just overnighting.

Nature tourism has given Kaikoura a much needed shot in the arm, and the future looks even brighter with proposals for a marine reserve, marine mammal sanctuary and Kaikoura mountains conservation park.

Keeping an eye on human sharks

WHALE WATCHING is becoming big business. The two companies involved at present expect to take 20,000 people to view the whales this year. At \$70 per head that adds up to \$1.4 million in ticket sales.

There is no question that Kaikoura Tours and Nature Watch Charters are in the business for the right reasons. In fact, Barbara Todd of Nature Watch started the tours in order to support her research of sperm whales.

But now there are nine additional applications in the pipeline to take people to the whales. Earlier this year one operator started without a permit required under the Marine Mammals Protection Act but was promptly shut down.

Mike Donoghue, the Department of Conservation's senior marine mammal conservation officer, says the department's first concern is for the whales, but on the other

hand he cannot ignore the fact that whale watching has been a "shot in the arm" for Kaikoura.

Canterbury University's Jane McGibbon is working under a DoC contract with Victoria University's Dr Scott Baker to assess what might be the optimum number of boats the whales can cope with. Dr Baker has carried out similar work on humpbacks in Alaska.

Mike Donoghue is cautious about the notion that the noise of the whale watching boats unduly harasses the whales. Noisy as the outboards are, most of their sound carries into the air and is of a high frequency.

On the other hand, low frequency sounds from slow revving commercial vessels are different. Kaikoura Tours are keen on the idea of a Marine Mammal Sanctuary out as far as the shipping lanes – about 15 nautical miles offshore. They believe that the low frequency sounds frighten whales more than the high revving outboards.

This summer DoC is expecting higher interest than ever in the whales. It is envisaged that more and more private boats will want to view them. Therefore signs are being erected around Kaikoura warning people of the correct ways in which to approach whales, the minimum distance they should keep from whales (100 metres) and the fact that they should not jump into the water with them.

Donoghue says it's well known that some whales "spook" easier than others, especially new arrivals. Fortunately the population off Kaikoura is all adolescent males. If they were breeding, DoC would impose much tighter restrictions on whale watching. But, he asks, what would you sooner want: "Dolphins in a concrete pool or whales in the ocean, even if the odd one is spooked? I know which I prefer."