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Leisure Activities in Marine Environments

In recent years we have seen a veritable ‘explosion’ in the use of the sea for a growing variety of marine leisure activities. This is now a truly global phenomenon that can be seen from Iceland to South Africa, Australia to Florida. Activities in the sea have always been part of coastal tourism, from paddling and swimming to sailing and diving to angling and boat trips. However, in the past decade or two we have seen the invention of new activities and the developments of variations on traditional marine activities. We now have coasteering, wild swimming, paddle-boarding, RIB and banana boats and sea kayaking, all giving tourists further opportunities to get pleasure from the marine environment.

Many of these activities also reflect a change in marine leisure with an increase in active rather than passive activities and an increase in adventure activities. This has, inevitably, increased the risk level of sea-based leisure activities in some ways. Several of the more adventurous new activities also involve travelling further from land or to less developed areas of coast, increasing the risk further. Interestingly, it appears that many tourists become ‘hooked’ on some sea-based leisure activities once they have experienced them on vacation. From that point onwards their desire to continue to participate in an activity will often influence their choice of vacation destination. The innovative developments we have seen in terms of sea-based leisure activities have led to a huge increase in participation in marine leisure activities. This has been stimulated by, and reflected in, the investment made in equipment and infrastructure for such activities by governments, commercial operators, and hotels and resorts.

However, some of these activities represent a risk to the marine environment too in terms of their impacts. There are great variations in the nature and scale of the impacts of these different leisure activities on the marine environment, and we will explore these in this chapter looking at the activities one by one. It is clear that in general leisure activities do not have a positive impact on the ocean – they do not make it a better or healthier place usually. Therefore, it is a matter of just how negative their impacts are from serious or severe to minor or maybe even neutral, and this might be the best we can hope for realistically.

Before that, though, I would like to offer several typologies of marine leisure activities that highlight different aspects of their nature and impacts. These will be presented in diagrammatic form and are of necessity, tentative and subjective. The characteristics of marine leisure activities outlined in Figure 5.1 show that there are considerable variations between different types of activities based on a range of variables including how much equipment is required, how weather dependent they are and how much personal energy the participant needs to expend. Some of the factors shown in this diagram also determine how expensive it is to take part in these activities.

Other important characteristics of marine leisure activities include whether they can be undertaken individually and/or in groups and whether they can be undertaken competitively, pitting one participant against another.

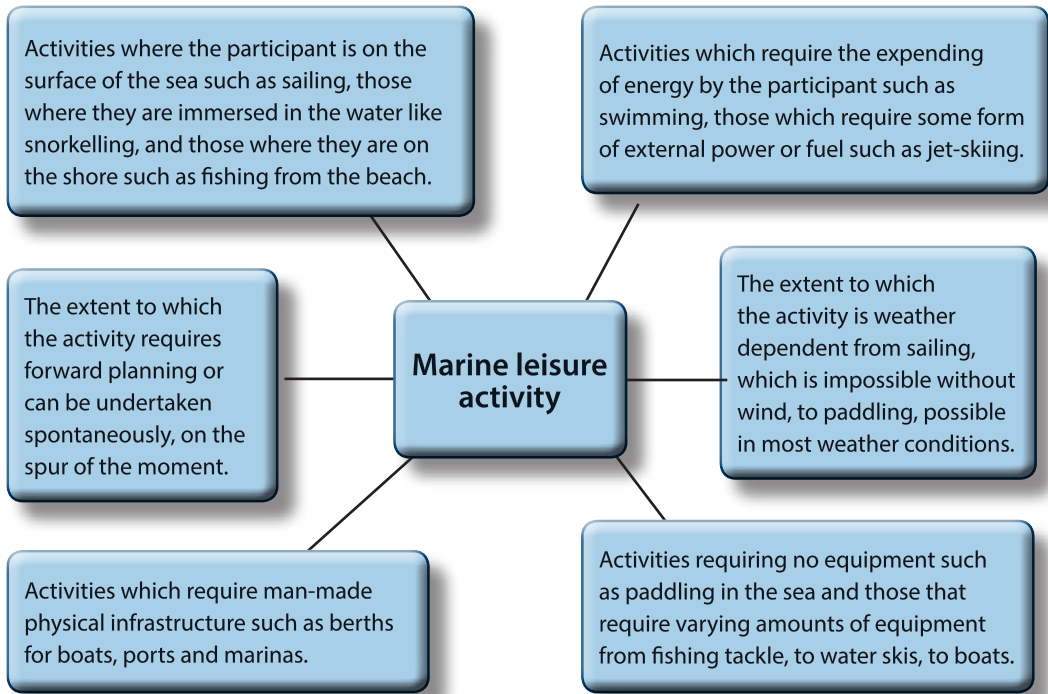


Figure 5.1: Types of activity based on their characteristics

Figure 5.2 looks at marine leisure activities in terms of what requirements they have of the participants. It shows that some require no particular skills and only minimal levels of fitness, while others require significant levels of skills and knowledge and/or physical fitness. It seems that some activities require both knowledge and skills, while others require a relatively high level of personal fitness, and others require little fitness, knowledge or particular skills.

Most will have potential risks and safety procedures that participants will need to observe, although these vary greatly between activities. Those swimming from a beach need to be aware of the risk of rip tides and that they should not swim if a red flag is flying. Sailing enthusiasts, however, have a myriad of risks to worry about, many established safety procedures to be aware of, and probably responsibilities laid down by law which they must follow.

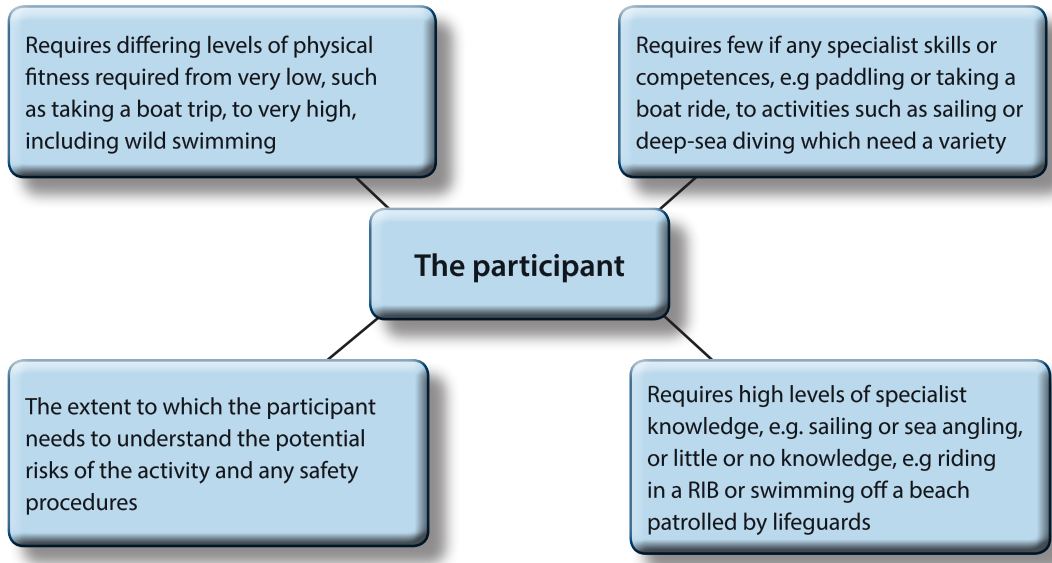


Figure 5.2: Types of activity based on their requirements of participants

Figure 5.3 looks at different marine leisure activities in terms of their potential impacts on the marine environment. It shows a wide range of factors relating to the impacts of marine leisure activities, some of which will be explored further when we look at different types of activity later in the chapter. I acknowledge that some activities such as swimming may be almost wholly neutral in their impacts on the marine environment but it cannot think of a single activity that has a positive impact on the ocean environment, although many bring economic benefits to operators and tourist destinations, as well as pleasure for the participants.

■ Paddling and swimming

In many ways, the most natural of leisure activities in the sea are paddling, swimming and wild or adventure swimming. Almost everyone who has visited the coast for leisure has paddled at some time even if it was just a matter of walking out into a few centimetres of water. Most have also swum in the sea at some point even if only for a few minutes close to shore. However, in recent years we have seen the rise of wild swimming or adventure swimming where the pleasure comes from going beyond the norm, swimming in remote or challenging locations, away from other swimmers.