Introduction:

The whale-watching activity first appeared in mainland Portugal in 1998, mainly due to the resident bottlenose dolphin (Tursiops truncatus) population in the Sado estuary (Hoyt, 2001), which turned the estuary into one of the best locations for dolphin watching in the mainland. Since 2000 whale-watching activities began to grow exponentially and became one of the most important maritime-touristic activities in the south of Portugal (Castro, 2010) (Fig. 1). However, only in 2006 a specific law was created for the whale-watching activity in mainland Portugal - Decreto-Lei n.º 9/2006.

Methods and Results:

Currently there are 16 companies with a total of 28 boats in southern Portugal with the legal permit to operate in the area between Tavira and Sagres (Fig. 2). However there are numerous companies operating without the required permit. Most of the companies operate two boats (64.3%) and, on average, the boats’ capacity is 15 tourists (Fig. 3). The majority of the companies during the high season (June to September) operate 4 trips per day. The trips have a duration of 1h30 – 2h and the cost of each trip is between 30€ and 45€. During 2010 and 2011, 4 companies allowed us to determine their high season revenue from whale-watching tours. The total income during these two years was estimated to be ca. 1,377,145€.

Discussion and Conclusions:

This region is especially important since it has now the highest number of whale watching companies in mainland Portugal, although there are few studies regarding the abundance and distribution of cetaceans in the area (Castro, 2010). Due to the profitability of the activity in the area, more boats and companies are expected in the upcoming years. Therefore, there is an urgent need to evaluate the situation, conduct studies, investigate the natural and anthropogenic threats and reinforce the legislation and management of the whale-watching activities in the south of Portugal.