
Voluntary National Cetacean Conservation Report

Submitted to the Conservation Committee by the Government of Australia

This report provides an update on cetacean conservation actions undertaken by Australia since IWC61.

1. Legal developments

All cetaceans are protected in Australian waters under the Commonwealth Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act) or under state legislation.

The first ten-year review of the EPBC Act is currently underway. Any amendments or discussions arising from this review relating to the cetacean provisions of the Act will be reported at the next Conservation Committee meeting in 2011.

2. Information on whale watching operations

The *Australian National Guidelines for Whale and Dolphin Watching 2005* form the basis for Australia's whale watching regulations, and have been adopted by all states and territories which have jurisdiction for the conservation and protection of whales and dolphins in coastal waters outside of the Australian Whale Sanctuary (up to 3 nautical miles from the coast).

The Australian Government continues to work closely with the whale watching industry, including through the establishment of the National Whale Watching Industry Roundtable, and the state/ territory governments to ensure the management of whale watching is appropriate for encouraging sustainable whale and dolphin watching.

3. Current Government programs related to cetacean conservation

Australia's government bodies participate in a range of programs at state, national and international levels to facilitate cetacean conservation.

3.1 National Initiatives

Current initiatives include:

- The Australian Government held the first National Whale Watching Industry Roundtable, 2 December 2009, attended by 11 industry representatives from Australia's premier whale watching areas. The Roundtable facilitated discussion on the management of whale watching in Australian waters and the options for encouraging responsible and sustainable whale watching.
- Australia hosted a Government Cetacean Management Workshop, 17-19 March this year attended by all states and the Northern Territory to further strengthen the working relationship between managers and identify cross-jurisdictional issues to share management experiences and improve the way cetacean incidents are managed across Australia. Discussions covered issues such as whale watching, disentanglements, strandings, ship strike, disease, and research needs.
- Australia is working with scientists and state/territory governments to develop a conservation strategy for Australia's two tropical inshore dolphins the Australian Snubfin (*Orcaella heinsohni*) and the Indo-Pacific Humpback (*Sousa chinensis*). A workshop was held on 4-5 May 2010 to identify the main threats and conservation priorities for the species.
- The Australian Government is currently reviewing three national recovery plans for Australia's five threatened whale species (2005-2010), including humpback, southern right, blue, fin and sei whales. The review will be completed by June 2010, and will determine what has been accomplished in the protection and management of these species over the last five years. Recommendations will also be made to determine if new recovery plans should be developed.

- The Australian Government holds roundtable forums on cetaceans with non-government organisations (NGOs) approximately three times per year. This year roundtable forums were held in August 2009, February 2010 and May 2010. The roundtable forums provide an opportunity for NGOs and government officials to discuss a wide range of issues relating to cetacean conservation including Australia's approach to the International Whaling Commission (IWC) and Australian cetacean conservation matters.

3.2 Research Projects

The Australian Marine Mammal Centre (AMMC) provides scientific research and advice to inform and support Australia's marine mammal conservation priorities. In 2009/10, the AMMC funded research on humpback whales, blue whales, southern right whales, and sperm whales, with a focus on population estimates and distribution. Over the past two years the Marine Mammal Grants Scheme has administered over \$1.6 million in grants to support over 26 research projects.

The AMMC is also leading Australia's scientific commitment to the Southern Ocean Research Partnership and was actively involved in the Joint Australia-New Zealand Antarctic Whale Expedition (AWE), which was successfully completed during February and March 2010

Other regional initiatives include the Australian Government's Indo-Pacific Cetacean Research and Conservation Fund (IPF). The Fund aims to attract high quality, innovative and relevant research projects that address research and conservation challenges of interest to the Australian Government, developing countries in the Indo-Pacific Region and the cetacean research and conservation community more generally.

4. Current threats to cetacean conservation and management measures taken/proposed

4.1 Marine Noise and Seismic Surveys

The Australian Government has developed a set of requirements for minimising the impacts of seismic activities undertaken for oil and gas exploration. Under the EPBC Act, policy statement 2.1 "Interaction between Offshore Seismic Exploration and Whales" September 2008 provides practical standards to minimise the risk of acoustic injury to whales in the vicinity of seismic survey operations, and provides guidance on the legal responsibilities of proponents undertaking the activities. (<http://www.environment.gov.au/epbc/publications/seismic.html>).

4.2 Strandings

The majority of Australian whale strandings take place in Tasmania and strandings are jointly managed by the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service (incident control and operational) and the Tasmanian Department of Primary Industries and Water (specialist advice, animal management, rescue and research). These agencies are responsible for responding to strandings throughout Tasmanian, covering 4,882 kms of coastline, and also collect valuable data from each stranding to assist ongoing research.

The austral summer of 2009/10 witnessed three mass strandings of long-finned pilot whales (*Globicephala melas*) between the West Coast and the Coast of Tasmania, and one incident along the West Australian Coast involving 87 individuals. Most strandings along Australia's coast involved small cetaceans, and these were most commonly bottlenose dolphins (various species).

There was a significant increase in the number of humpback whales (different age classes) coming ashore in poor condition along the Western Australian coastline. In the 2009 migration season a total of 47 individuals were reported. Western Australian wildlife officers are investigating this increase in events.

Australia has a world-leading response capacity to assist individuals and groups of whales in distress, in cases where assistance is physically and logistically possible.

The Australian Government and state governments have worked together over many years to establish strong communications and operations networks to manage and respond to events such as whale and dolphin strandings. As part of this communication network, officers from the Australian Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and Arts (DEWHA) liaise with the Department of Defence to verify if any Navy activities have taken place in the vicinity of any stranding event. No correlation has been found between naval or seismic activities and any of the recent strandings in Australian waters.

5. Reporting systems for cetacean injuries/mortality/strandings

Australia utilises a number of reporting systems to identify events resulting in cetacean injuries or mortality. Some of the reporting systems are established under EPBC Act legislative requirements e.g. fisheries by-catch reporting. There is also surveillance provided by Coastwatch – a coordinating maritime response service – for a range of Australian Government agencies. Their duties include identifying and responding to illegal fishing in Australian waters, detecting and reporting environmental incidents such as marine pollution and unusual marine mammal mortality events for many remote areas of Commonwealth water.

Incident reporting – State/Commonwealth cooperation

Cetacean injuries, strandings and mortality are generally reported to local and State government agencies as most incidents are observed in coastal waters (up to 3nm from shore). The Victorian Government recently launched a ‘Whale and Dolphin Emergency Hotline’ for members of the public to report an incident, and other states have similar arrangements in place.

A close, cooperative working relationship exists between the State and Commonwealth government agencies responsible for cetacean conservation and incident prevention, response and outcomes are managed at a number of levels.

In recent maritime incidents such as the uncontrolled release of oil and gas from the Montara Wellhead Platform off north-western Australia in late 2009; the loss of heavy fuel oil from a container ship off the Queensland coast in March 2009; and the grounding of a bulk coal carrier in the Great Barrier Reef in April 2010; cross-jurisdictional networks were utilised to communicate information on possible cetacean impacts and mitigation measures as part of the boarder coordinated responses.

6. International cooperation activities

The Australian Government is party to a number of multilateral agreements related to whales, in addition to our engagement in the IWC. These include the *Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES)*, and the *Convention on Migratory Species (CMS)*.

In April this year, Australian cetacean disentanglement expert Mr Douglas Coughran attended the IWC *Workshop on Welfare Issues Associated with the Entanglement of Large Whales* held in Hawai’i. The workshop provided an important opportunity to exchange expertise, and collaborate with other IWC countries on developing a best-practice management approach to the prevention and response to a cetacean entanglement.