

REPUBLIC OF PANAMA

Voluntary National Cetacean Conservation Report 2009

Briefing presented by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Panama

This voluntary national cetacean conservation report is the first one being submitted by the Republic of Panama to the Conservation Committee of the International Whaling Commission. This is a partial report, intended to inform the Conservation Committee on some of the recent activities and initiatives carried out in Panamanian territorial waters for the purpose of preserving marine mammals.

1. Legal Developments

The Republic of Panama has committed itself to the conservation of marine mammals under **Law 13 of May 5, 2005**, that established the Marine Corridor of the Republic of Panama in order to protect and preserve marine mammals.

The Marine Corridor comprises all bodies of water under the jurisdiction of the Republic of Panama in which mammal species are provided special national protection, and the State obligates itself to develop mechanisms to successfully repopulate them in compliance with the sustainable development principle.

The mentioned law promotes research on marine mammals and regulates whale-watching activities. It has also established environmental awareness and civil watchfulness programs.

With this main objective in mind, the Water Resources Authority of Panama was created by Law 44 of November 23, 2006. It is the national institution in charge of managing water resources and developing national fishing and aquaculture policies guaranteeing the development of a productive, sustainable and socially-oriented marine resources culture in harmony with the environment.

The Water Resources Authority of Panama established regulations on **the Sighting of Cetaceans in Territorial Waters of the Republic of Panama** by Resolution ADM/ARAP No. 01 of January 29, 2007, published in Official Gazette No. 25,731 of February 13, 2007, with the objective of regulating whale-watching activities, guaranteeing the protection and adequate handling of all cetacean species, and facilitating non-lethal economic activities in relation to the cetaceans, permitting the inhabitants of coastal and island areas afflicted by poverty and extreme poverty to obtain new forms of income through watching activities, following the best international practices.

2. Recent programs related to the conservation of cetaceans

Aiming to contribute to the orderly and integral development of cetacean watching, scientific research, environmental education, and the protection of cetaceans, the National "Tommy Guardia" Geographic Institute, in charge of making the official maps of the Republic of Panama, has drafted a **Map for the Responsible Watching of Cetaceans or Whales in the Republic of Panama (1:250,000 scale)**, incorporating field information on the whale sighting areas based on observations made on site, surveys and interviews of people living in coast and island towns, passenger boat operators, sport fishermen, and NGOs, especially the Green Association of Panama (ASVEPA).

The map is based on the legal framework provided by Law No. 13 of May 5, 2005 that created the Marine Corridor of Panama for the protection of marine mammals, and reference points on the jurisdictional waters of the Republic of Panama, showing topographical features, the hydrography, existing roads, settlements, bathymetrical data, ports, and airports, among other information, as well as the whale sighting surfaces.

The map, published preliminarily, seeks to incorporate in a three-year period georeferences of the sightings using GPS technology, identifying the species, frequency of the sightings, biophysical references of the areas being studied, nearby towns and settlements, and infrastructures, including transportation (roads, ports, airports), hotel and tourist services, tour operators, vessels, other existing cultural and biodiversity attractions, as well as the location of and links to protection, conservation and research institutions.

Plans are underway to improve the basic 1:250,000 map of the Darien area using Shuttle Radar Topography Mission (SRTM) data obtained by NASA's space shuttle mission C-band and X-band interferometric synthetic aperture radars (IFSARs) that collect topographic data, including the hydrography of over 80% of Earth's land mass, providing complementary information on 1:100,000 maps, aerial photographs and orthophotographs.

Once this data has been verified and validated on the 1:250,000 scale map, based on the geographic information system technology available, a geoportal will be created, using open source tools for standardization, documentation and visualization of the whale sightings.

3. International cooperation activities

Recognizing the importance of the conservation of whales and cetaceans and of their environment, the Government of Panama is a party to several international instruments related to the whales:

- International Whaling Commission (IWC)
- Action Plan for the Protection of the Marine Environment and Coastal Areas of the South-East Pacific
- Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES)
- Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)
- Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species (CMS)

Additionally, Panama belongs to the Buenos Aires Group, composed of Latin American countries that have been issuing declarations asserting the right of sovereign states to handle marine mammals by non lethal means, particularly through watching and research activities.

4. Final considerations

This report contains partial information regarding the activities being carried out in the territorial waters of Panama for the purpose of promoting the conservation of marine mammals and providing the instruments that are necessary to develop cetacean watching tourism and non lethal research. The Map for the Responsible Watching of Cetaceans or Whales in the Republic of Panama is an important step to promote these activities, which are being facilitated by legislative developments in this field.

We invite other countries of the Hemisphere to participate in this project, to expand the scope of the initiative to build the "humpback whale route" and include other cetaceans, covering all seasons and stages of their life, enabling to increase the existing knowledge on the different species in order to advantageously relate to them in a non lethal manner, promoting environmental education and research.