

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 IWC60

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 2010.

2. Information on whale watching operations

Australia continues to be mindful of recent reports from the IWC Scientific Committee Whale Watching Sub-Committee relating to the possible impacts of whale and dolphin watching on individuals and populations. The Australian Government will continue to work closely with all states to ensure that whale and dolphin watching is managed appropriately and consideration of distance and time limits, open/closed areas and approach parameters is ongoing. This work is also a key element in the proposal to establish the National Whale and Dolphin Sanctuary Network (see item below).

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:

- Australia hosted a Government Cetacean Management Workshop in February 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 legislation implementation, whale watching, disentanglements, strandings and research needs.
- Australia has produced the final of the 'Global Status Report on the Socio-Economic Value and Conservation Status of Whales and Dolphins'. The final report presents an overview of the socio-economic and conservation values of living cetaceans and links to the recent Australian Government proposals for Conservation Management Plans and Regional Research Partnerships being considered by the IWC.
- There has been further work on the development of the Australian Government's commitment to establish a National Network of Whale and Dolphin Sanctuaries to promote the conservation of whale and dolphin populations in key cetacean habitat areas throughout Australian waters. A workshop was held late last year to encourage State government participation in the Network and progress was made in better harmonising whale watching regulations between the different States and National governments and encouraging community stakeholder involvement.

3.2 Research Projects

In 2008/09, the Australian Marine Mammal Centre (AMMC) funded research on humpback and blue whales, as well as Australian snub-fin and Indo-Pacific humpback dolphins. Research methods utilised in these projects include population genetics and phylogeography; abundance estimates; mark-recapture analysis and genetic studies. The AMMC also hosted a Southern Right Whale workshop bringing together researchers and managers to review and prioritise research on Southern right whales within Australian waters.

The AMMC has also improved their website and it includes details of research projects and recent workshops (refer www.marinemammals.gov.au).

In November 2009 the Australian government committed a total of \$32 million over the next five years to cetacean research programs in Australian waters and internationally. Research will focus on southern ocean whales and will utilise powerful non-lethal research techniques. Much of the research will be coordinated through the AMMC and a portion of the funding is directed to cooperative international research.

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

4.1 Marine Noise and Seismic Surveys

Australia recently revised the guidelines used by the oil and gas exploration industry in deciding how to mitigate the impact of their seismic surveys on whales. The revised “Interaction between Offshore Seismic Exploration and Whales” guidelines were launched in September 2008 (<http://www.environment.gov.au/epbc/publications/seismic.html>). The Australian Federal Government hosted a workshop in April 2009 with participation by industry, scientists and various State government agencies to carefully examine the issue of seismic surveys and cetaceans.

4.2 Strandings

The austral summer of 2008/09 included a higher than average number of mass strandings with four large strandings on the coast of Tasmania and one on the West Australian coast. 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 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. DEWHA also checks if any seismic testing has occurred in the area prior to the stranding. Thus far, there is no correlation to naval or seismic activities for any of the recent strandings in Australian waters.

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. More than 80 per cent of Australian whale strandings take place in Tasmania and the Tasmanian Department of Primary Industries and Water has some of the nation’s most experienced and well equipped whale stranding response teams. These teams are justifiably proud of their rescue efforts and also collect valuable data from each stranding to help in the ongoing research associated with these phenomena.

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 eg 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 reporting sightings of marine mammals.

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

6. International cooperation activities

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

In April 2009, Australia supported and attended the first International Marine Mammal Protected Areas Conference in Hawaii. The Secretariat for the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) launched their recently finalised “Guidelines for Whale and Dolphin Watching in the Pacific Islands Region” at this conference. Australia assisted in the development of the Guidelines.

Australia has also provided support for the next meeting of the signatories of the CMS “*Memorandum of Understanding for the Conservation of Cetaceans and their Habitats in the Pacific Islands Region*” to be hosted by CMS and SPREP in Noumea in July 2009.

The Australian Government hosted the Planning Workshop for the Southern Ocean Research Partnership at the Australian National Maritime Museum, Sydney, 23-26 March 2009. The workshop was attended by over 50 participants, with formal representation from 12 countries (Australia, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, France, Italy, Mexico, New Zealand, South Africa, Uruguay and USA) and several research and environmental organisations.