
**Update on whale protection measures in the Pacific region
Information Paper**

**Submitted by the Government of Australia
to the Conservation Committee
59th Annual Meeting of the International Whaling Commission
May 2007**

It is important that the International Whaling Commission (IWC), the primary international forum to provide for the conservation of whales, continues to influence and encourage whale protection initiatives at global, regional and national levels. This paper highlights the current status of whale protection measures in the Pacific region and the key gaps and threats that need to be addressed.

WHALE PROTECTION INITIATIVES

Sanctuaries

Sanctuaries provide whales with a place of refuge from some of the key threats to whale species and their habitats, particularly commercial whaling. Whale sanctuaries have many proven benefits such as supporting a lucrative and sustainable whale watching industry, helping in the recovery of threatened species and highlighting threats to whales and marine ecosystems through research and knowledge. The IWC has stated that commercial whale watching, as a non-consumptive enterprise, is a clearly sustainable aspect of the whale industry.

South Pacific whale sanctuary

The south Pacific is home to all species of great whales found in the Southern Hemisphere such as humpback, blue, fin, sei, southern right, Bryde's, minke, pygmy right and sperm whales. Several proposals have been submitted to the IWC since 2001 to designate an area for a South Pacific Whale Sanctuary within which commercial whaling would be prohibited irrespective of the conservation status of relevant whale stocks. The proposals have not yet received the three-quarters majority vote required for implementation. Given the recent voting history on the South Pacific Whale Sanctuary the proponents are further developing the proposal for submission at future meetings.

Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for the conservation of cetaceans and their habitats in the Pacific Islands Region and the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme Whale and Dolphin Action Plan

The MOU for the conservation of cetaceans and their habitats in the Pacific Island Region came into effect in September 2006 under the auspices of the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS) with 9 initial signatories. Two new members signed on at the first meeting of signatories in March 2007. The MOU is a landmark initiative for the region and encourages signatories to work together in the region to ensure coordinated efforts to protect and conserve all cetaceans and their habitats, while safeguarding the associated cultural values for Pacific Island peoples. Areas for action identified in the MOU are: threat reduction, habitat protection (including migratory corridors) research and monitoring, education and public awareness, information exchange, capacity building, responses to strandings and entanglements, sustainable and responsible cetacean based tourism and international cooperation.

A meeting to review the 2003-2007 Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) Whale and Dolphin Action Plan (WDAP) and to develop the new Action Plan (2007-2012) was held in March 2007. The new WDAP if endorsed by SPREP members is expected to form the Action Plan of the new MOU.

KEY THREATS

Whales and dolphins in the Pacific region face existing and potential threats and pressures from many sources which influence their migration and their long-term population distribution, abundance and survival. These include climate change, pollution, ship strikes, fishery interactions, ecotourism and human interactions, habitat degradation and commercial and scientific whaling.

Of particular concern for the Pacific region is the 2007/08 season of Japan's scientific whaling program (JARPA II) which will target humpback and fin whales. This will potentially impact on small and endangered humpback populations in Fiji, Samoa, Cook Islands and Niue. The endangered Pacific stock of humpback whales have shown little recovery in population levels from the heavy exploitation they were subject to during decades of commercial whaling.

GAPS

- While the declaration of national sanctuaries in the region has provided some protection for whales within national boundaries the recovery and long-term status of whale populations in the south Pacific region remains uncertain.
- Without the establishment of a South Pacific Whale Sanctuary areas outside national sanctuaries such as high seas, remain vulnerable to direct take and scientific whaling.
- Lack of information and data in much of the region necessitates a precautionary approach to the management and mitigation of threats.