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## Voluntary National Cetacean Conservation Report

Submitted to the Conservation Committee  
by the Government of Australia

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**This report provides an update on information provided in Australia's  
Voluntary National Cetacean Conservation Report submitted to IWC 57.**

### 1. Legal and other developments

All cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoises) are protected in Australian waters. Under State legislation, all cetaceans are protected in waters to 3 nautical miles. Under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*:

- all Commonwealth waters (3- 200 nautical miles) are declared as part of the Australian Whale Sanctuary;
- it is an offence to kill, injure or interfere with any cetacean in the Australian Whale Sanctuary.

Five whale species are currently listed as nationally threatened:

- blue whale (endangered)
- southern right whale (endangered)
- sei whale (vulnerable)
- fin whale (vulnerable)
- humpback whale (vulnerable)

Activities that may significantly impact on whale species are referred under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* and undergo an environmental assessment. Key activities regularly assessed are oil and gas exploration and development, including seismic surveying, and military exercises.

### 2. Information on whale watching operations

The Australian whale watching industry has demonstrated a remarkable growth in recent years. High growth rates in whale watching reported by Australia to IWC 56 have continued.

Whale watching in Australia continues to be focused predominantly on inshore dolphins, and humpback and southern right whales, which migrate relatively close to the Australian coastline.

#### *Whalewatching operations*

In 2005, all states and territories and the Australian Federal Government adopted the revised *Australian National Guidelines for Whale and Dolphin Watching*. These Guidelines establish a national framework for all jurisdictions for the regulation of interactions between people and cetaceans (whales and dolphins). The guidelines apply equally to commercial and recreational whale watching and have the dual aims of:

- minimising harmful impacts on whales and dolphins; and
- ensuring people have the best opportunity to enjoy and learn about the whales and dolphins found in Australian waters.

All jurisdictions are in the process of updating legislation in line with the revised guidelines as necessary.

### 3. Current Government programs related to cetacean conservation

Whale strandings, entanglements and issues associated with a growing interest in whalewatching are major areas of focus for Australia's cetacean conservation initiatives. In addition, initiatives are also being developed to address other factors affecting whale conservation, including lack of knowledge concerning population, abundance and distribution of cetacean species, habitat degradation, climatic change, marine pollution and whaling.

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

### 3.1 State/Territory Cooperation

State and Territory Governments are responsible for conservation and protection of whales in coastal waters (out to 3 nm limit). This includes responding to strandings and whales entangled in marine debris. States and Territory Governments also manage most of the human/whale interactions, particularly with regards to strandings and whalewatching.

The Australian Government, through the Department of the Environment and Heritage, works closely with the State and Territory Governments on various national initiatives relating to whales (see below).

### 3.2 National Initiatives

The Australian Government, through the Department of Environment and Heritage, is engaged in a number of national initiatives aimed at improving coordination amongst governments, researchers and conservation groups to provide improved protection for whales. These include the following.

- *Sightings and strandings data bases*  
A national data base to record cetacean sightings and strandings is now operational. Strandings of whales and dolphins are relatively frequent along Southern Hemisphere coastlines during summer. State agencies have primary responsibility for stranding responses. National directories of data from around Australia are currently being developed. Part of this process includes: identifying what data is currently being kept throughout Australia, how this data is stored, accessibility of data to outside users, and possibilities for linkages between data sets.
- *Strandings Sampling Protocol*  
National standards for the collection of biological samples from stranded whales have been developed to improve scientific analysis and subsequent interpretation of data. This will hopefully assist in eventually answering questions on why whales strand.
- *Disentanglement training*  
Cetaceans are increasingly found entangled in fishing gear, shark control nets or marine debris. Best practice training for Government staff involved in disentanglement operations is conducted annually around the country, with updates on equipment and drawing upon case histories provided by an extended network involved in disentanglement events, including from the Northern Hemisphere. The most recent development is a buoyant satellite tag that can be attached to entangling material to allow the animal to be tracked until conditions are suitable for a disentanglement attempt. The Australian Government is providing units to operational staff around the coastline in preparation for the southern winter-spring migration season.
- *Review of the Conservation Status of Australia's Smaller Whales and Dolphins*  
A review of the conservation status of all cetacean species not currently listed as threatened was published in February 2006. Little change was made to the categories allocated in the Action Plan for Australian Cetaceans published in 1996, due to the paucity of information available on all species.
- *Fisheries by-catch reporting*  
Improved mechanisms for fishermen to report by-catch or other interactions with whales, dolphins and other protected species (eg turtles and dugong) have been developed.

In addition to the above initiatives, management tools such as the development of recovery plans and guidelines are developed at the national level to provide management measures to address key threatening processes that impact on cetacean conservation.

#### **Recovery Plans**

Recovery plans for five threatened great whale species – the humpback, southern right, blue, fin and sei whales – have been adopted. The recovery plans identify whaling and habitat degradation as key threats to whales, and establish a range of programs to ensure the ongoing recovery of the species. Satellite monitoring is a key action

identified in the recovery plans and will improve knowledge of whale movements and migratory pathways, and help protect important habitats. The recovery plans for these five species will be in force until 2010.

### ***Guidelines for Seismic Surveys***

There is concern that the use of underwater sound devices may cause distress in cetaceans and have an impact on cetacean populations and behaviour. The Department of the Environment and Heritage is currently reviewing the Guidelines on the Application of the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* to Interactions Between Offshore Seismic Surveys and Large Cetaceans to ensure that seismic survey operations conducted in Australia employ the best and most effective mitigation and monitoring techniques to avoid significant impacts on whales.

### **3.3 International Affiliations and Cooperation**

The Australian Government is party to a number of multi-lateral agreements related to whales. These include:

- International Whaling Commission (IWC);
- Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES); and
- Convention on Migratory Species (CMS)

Australia is working in the South Pacific to encourage domestic and regional protection for cetaceans. As part of this, Australia is working with South Pacific countries to develop a “Memorandum of Understanding on the Conservation of Cetaceans and their Habitats in the Pacific Islands Region” under the auspices of the Convention on Migratory Species.

### **3.4 Research Projects**

The Australian Government is funding a range of projects aimed at determining the population numbers and trend, migratory pathways and important habitat areas (calving, resting, feeding and breeding) for a number of whale species. In 2005-06 the Government is spending AUD\$350,000 in support of whale research projects. A number of other organisations throughout Australia are also conducting and funding cetacean research.

A summary of relevant research activities in 2005-06 is provided in the following table.

<b>Whale species</b>	<b>Research focus</b>
Blue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Determination of distribution and abundance in Bonney Upwelling (Victoria) and Perth Canyon (Western Australia) - two known feeding areas from December to April each year.</li> <li>• Examination of the purpose for blue whales occurrence in Geographe Bay, Western Australia from October to December each year (possible calving/breeding area).</li> </ul>
Humpback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Genetic based-population comparisons from east and west coasts to determine level of interchange between these two groups.</li> </ul>
Southern right	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collection of information on distribution and abundance around southern coastline, life history data and usage of habitat.</li> </ul>
Inshore dolphins	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Determination of methods to estimate abundance and trends in populations of inshore dolphins.</li> <li>• Investigation of <i>Orcella</i> spp in north-western Australia by DNA samples to clarify which species is present between <i>O. brevirostris</i> and <i>O. heinsohni</i>.</li> </ul>
General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• National disentanglement training.</li> <li>• ongoing development of satellite tagging technology.</li> <li>• Whale and dolphin research priorities conference.</li> <li>• Bi-lateral discussions with New Zealand on cooperative efforts for whale rescues and other common whale issues and research.</li> <li>• Monitoring marine mammal interactions in a trawl fishery.</li> <li>• Pilot project using pelagic sea bird observation trips to record cetaceans.</li> </ul>