

Proposal of the Republic of Panama for the establishment of Traffic Separation Schemes and Prevention of Vessel Collision with Whales

The Republic of Panama, as a leading maritime country occupying the number one position in vessels registration, may rely on such navigation aids, which already are part of commercial maritime activity in most countries of the world. About seventeen thousand (17,000) commercial vessels transit annually the Gulf of Panama carrying cargo to four (4) major port facilities or to transit the Panama Canal. The number of Panamax vessel have nearly double in 15 years, from 3,700 to 6,200 and with the expansion of the Panama Canal it is expected an increase in number and size of vessels, including post-Panamax vessel.

Therefore, this initiative is aimed to improve safety navigation by reducing the risk of collisions of merchant ships traveling in opposite directions daily from Asia, central Pacific, West Coast of North, Central and South America. The specific establishment and implementation of Traffic Separation Schemes is one of the first steps towards the organization of maritime traffic in the Gulf of Panama and other areas of commercial navigation in the Pacific and Caribbean coast of Panama.

Under the leadership of the Panama Maritime Authority and in conjunction with the Panama Canal Authority, the Maritime Chamber, Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute and the Marviva Foundation, Panama has been working for several months on designing four two-ways Traffic Separation Schemes, three for the Pacific and one for the Caribbean, to be presented to the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and in accordance with the requirements set out by Resolution A.572 (14) and Circular MSC/Circ. 1060, and for consideration by the Sub-Committee on Navigation in order to be approved by the Maritime Safety Committee.

Briefly, Panama has recorded 13 whale casualties in two years, mostly humpback whales. The three schemes designed for the Pacific side are

expected to reduce the potential of ship collisions and pollution accidents and along seven marine protected areas under different categories of protection and including Wildlife Sanctuaries, UNESCO World Heritage site and wetlands internationally protected under RAMSAR convention.

More important, the traffic separation schemes will be established in areas heavily used by several species of cetaceans, with vital relevance for humpback whales. Humpback whales from both north and south hemispheres winter in Central America and Panama. Southern population visiting Las Perlas Archipelago has been estimated in 900 individual across several seasons and up to 300 individuals per season, about 25% calves.

Based on a temporal and spatial analyses in real time of whales tagged with satellite transmitters and over 800 vessels AIS transmissions, it is estimated that the implementation of the scheme in the Gulf of Panama would reduce the navigation area and therefore the potential area of collision between ships and whales in ninety-three percent (93%), as would reduce the interactions between ships and whales in ninety-five percent (95%).

In conclusion, the implementation of the traffic separation schemes in Panama is of vital importance for navigational safety as well as for the protection of sensitive ecosystems and whale population wintering in Panama. An important requirement by the IMO is the consultation with the maritime industry; a process that has reached several port authorities around the world already and Panama has received excellent reviews. Any support or recommendations by the IWC and individual countries are welcome by Panama.