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Progress on the IWC Conservation Management Plan for the Critically Endangered Eastern South Pacific Southern Right Whale Population

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Eastern South Pacific (ESP) southern right whales are classified as Critically Endangered and in 2012 the IWC adopted a Conservation Management Plan (CMP) for this population.

The ESP SRW Conservation Management Plan aims to guide and encourage range state stakeholders and international partners to adopt and implement measures for the recovery of this population to levels that will allow the species to withstand both environmental and anthropogenic impacts as well as to ensure its long-term survival.

In the short term, the plan is focused to 1) obtain baseline data, particularly referring to population size, areas of concentration of the species (breeding or feeding areas) and stock structure; 2) conduct a detailed assessment of potential impacts in identify areas of concentration and; 3) develop specific mitigation strategies.

Actions of high priority that should be addressed in the short-term have been identified. Progress during the period June 2014 to April 2015 is reported here.

RES-02: Increase documentation of sightings and photo-identification of individuals

From June 2014 to April 2015, three sightings were reported along the Chilean coast totaling three adults and one calf. All were one-day sightings and therefore it was not possible to monitor the whales afterwards or obtain photo-identification.

RES-05: Identify breeding area(s) for southern right whales

Galletti Vernazzani *et al.* (2014)[1] reported the first documented record of likely reproductive behavior in this population as well as the southernmost sighting of a cow-calf pair along with several sightings off southern Chile. These records provide information on a possible breeding ground.

The 2014 record of mother-calf pair was reported off Isla de Chiloe, southern Chile. This represents the southernmost cow-calf pair recorded to date and further highlights that Isla de Chiloe could be part of a breeding area.

Considering the importance to identify a breeding area for this population and the continual observation of whales, reproductive behaviour and calves over the years in southern Chile, dedicated research efforts are needed to further monitor the presence of southern right whales in this area during austral winter/spring.

MIT-01: Release of entangled whales and prevent entanglements

One of the sightings corresponded to an adult southern right whale that was entangled off Pichilemu, central Chile, on 17 October 2014. Any anthropogenic removal would be very detrimental to the population and the potential impact from entanglement/vessel strike at population level is considered a major risk under the IWC-CMP.

[1] Galletti Vernazzani, B., Cabrera, E. and Brownell Jr, R.L. 2014. Eastern South Pacific southern right whale photo-identification catalogue reveals behavior and habitat use patterns. *Marine Mammal Science*. 30(1): 389–398

Personnel from the National Fisheries Service of Pichilemu first reported the whale and were able to record videos. According to the people that took the video, there were many ropes and strings covering the ventral zone of the whale. They noted the right pectoral fin could not move easily due to the ropes and strings.

As soon as the whale was reported, coordinated efforts between the National Fisheries Service, the Chilean Navy, the Chilean NGO Centro de Conservacion Cetacea and the IWC Global Whale Entanglement Response Network were conducted in order to develop and implement the best strategy to localize and try to disentangle the whale.

Based on the photographs and video, members of IWC Global Whale Entanglement Response Network indicated that it seemed that at least three ropes were wrapped on the right fin (Figure 1) and that the rope over the head may be the center of the entanglement (Figure 2). Therefore, they all agreed that although it was difficult to say if this entanglement is likely to be lethal or not, it could be considered a "complex" entanglement that involved a pectoral flipper and the head.

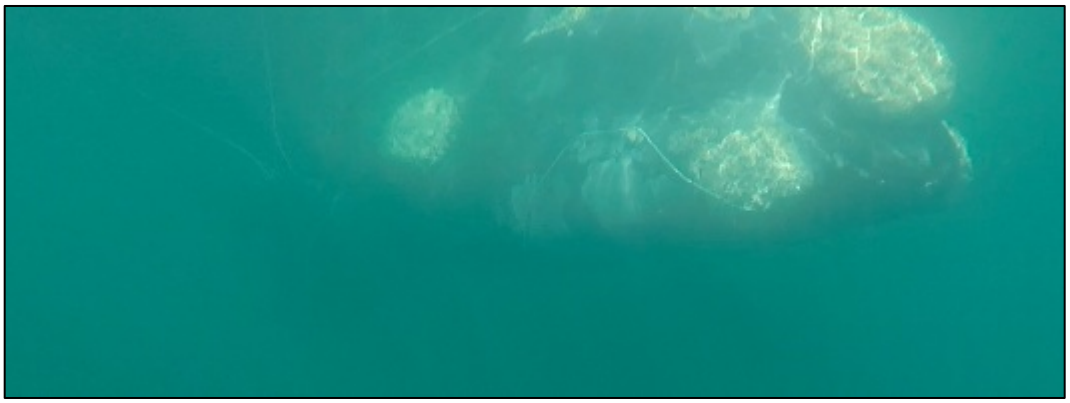

Figure 1 - Southern right whale entangled with rope around its right flipper (extracted from the video)

Figure 2: Southern right whale entangled with rope around its head (extracted from the video)

Also they noted that most probably the whale was recently entangled based on the apparent health of whale, and the fact that the rope did not seem to be very tight and was probably still re-arranging itself on the whale. There was no evidence of heavy weight attached to the rope. The video further indicated that the animal was actively avoiding vessels and doing fast surface turns. Therefore it could be quite sensitive at the moment and likely to be upset by any further novelty, including approaches by boats.

It was concluded that the approach to the whale would need an experienced skipper and cutting team. Even though getting to the spot on the head to cut the rope would be very dangerous and risky unless it can be calmed down by slow persistent approaches to avoid unexpected reactions of the whale.

Considering that currently there is no actual disentanglement experience in Chile and that only few people have received training on large whale disentanglement, the first priority was to ensure people safety. Secondly, a high priority was set up to achieve high quality documentation of the case and if possible, evaluate *in situ* the possibility to cut the ropes and disentangle the whale.

Thanks to the support of the Chilean Navy, more than fourteen hours of marine survey were conducted around the sighting location. Also, an aerial survey was conducted the day after to cover a larger area. Members of the national sighting networks were also contacted in order to alert the rescue team if the whale was sighted and broad national media coverage also informed people about this case and the importance to try and disentangle the whale.

Although efforts to find the whales were conducted for more than two weeks, it was impossible to locate the animal. However the immediate and positive response of national authorities, civil society and IWC Global Whale Entanglement Response Network to coordinate actions, demonstrates that the country is prepared to attend similar events in the future. The lack of trained people to disentangle a whale highlights the need for reaching a high degree of capacity in the country to better respond to future entanglements.

In this regard, the government of Chile is coordinating with Dr. David Mattila, technical advisor for Entanglement Response and Ship Strike Reduction of the IWC Secretariat, a disentanglement workshop for November 2015. The southern right whale entanglement event furthers stress the importance to implement such workshops in Chile and the region.

MIT-05: **Inclusion of Right Whale Conservation Considerations and Mitigation Measures in the Environmental Impact Evaluation and Permitting System for Large-Scale Coastal/Marine Projects**

Since 2011 the IWC Scientific Committee has stressed the need that environmental impact assessment considers possible impacts on cetacean habitats, particularly related to the important presence of blue whales off Isla de Chiloe and a large-scale wind farm project that is planned on that area.

In 2013, with the new information presented on the presence of southern right whales off Isla de Chiloe, the IWC Scientific Committee stressed that "In light of this critically endangered status and the importance of this area for the recovery of the population, it **strongly recommends** relocation of the wind farm project away from shore, and **reiterates** the need for the urgent development of an environmental impact assessment that considers possible impacts on cetacean habitats"[2].

The large-scale wind farm project that was revoked in 2012 by the Supreme Court started a new environmental impact assessment process and in 2014, the Chilean Navy requested the company (Ecopower) to provide information on the possible impacts on cetaceans, particularly for blue whales and southern right whales.

PACB-01: **Development of a strategy to increase public awareness and build capacity in range states**

As part of the southern right whale entanglement event, the National Fisheries Service, the Chilean Navy and Centro de Conservacion Cetacea developed a strong public awareness campaign using national media as well as social networks in order to encourage coastal communities to report any possible sighting of the entangled whale as well as to create awareness of their critically endangered status and avoid any potential harassment.

[2] International Whaling Commission. 2014. Report of the Scientific Committee. *Journal of Cetacean Research and Management* 15 (Suppl.). 1-75 .