

## **Conservation Committee intersessional progress since IWC67**

*Prepared by the chairs of CC working groups and the Secretariat*

July 2019

### **Action Requested**

The Conservation Committee Planning Group (CCPG) is asked to note and provide any comments on intersessional progress made by since IWC67 and future plans for this area of work.

#### **1. Introduction**

This paper provides an update on intersessional progress made by the Conservation Committee and its Working Groups since IWC67.

#### **2. Strategic Issues**

The *Conservation Committee Strategic Plan* and work plan for the Conservation Committee can be found at <https://iwc.int/conservation-committee>

*Working Methods for the Conservation Committee* have been updated and placed on the IWC website at [https://iwc.int/document\\_3690.download](https://iwc.int/document_3690.download).

The Secretariat has been working with New Zealand to develop a detailed specification for an integrated Conservation Database to replace the current voluntary reports. Unfortunately this work has been delayed due to the departure of the Secretariat's IT officer, and it is hoped that this work can continue when a replacement has been recruited.

#### **3. Thematic work areas – updates from Working Groups**

##### **3.1 Bycatch Standing Working Group, chair Stephanie Langerock (Belgium)**

The BMI ten-year strategic plan and two-year workplan was endorsed at IWC67 and is available at <https://iwc.int/bycatch>. The Bycatch Coordinator contract was extended following IWC67 to the end of October 2020 with funding from several Contracting Governments and organisations through the Voluntary Conservation Fund.

The first face-to-face meeting of the BMI Expert Panel took place in Kenya on 8<sup>th</sup> May, and focused on establishing a sense of team amongst its members, considering the vision of the BMI and the potential for affiliated and pilot projects to develop internal BMI capacity and its network of collaborators. Twelve members of the Expert Panel attended the meeting. The minutes of the meeting will be made available at <https://iwc.int/expert-advisory-panel-on-bycatch>. A review of the Expert Panel membership will be undertaken later in 2019, with the potential to fill geographic and expertise gaps.

The BMI held a regional workshop on bycatch in the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea (8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> May) in Nairobi, Kenya, attended by regional experts and stakeholders. This event was funded by the Government of France, the Pew Foundation, WWF International, the Western Indian Marine Science Association (WIOMSA), and the US Marine Mammal Commission. A total of 49 participants from 18 different countries (including 24 participants from within the Indian Ocean region) and multiple disciplines attended the workshop. Participants included regional representatives from fishing communities, cetacean and bycatch scientists, social scientists, fisheries and wildlife managers and the BMI Expert Panel. There was also participation from the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission, UN FAO and UN CMS. The workshop principally aimed to develop a broad-scale picture of cetacean bycatch across the North and Western Indian Ocean region and explore the challenges and opportunities related to the monitoring and mitigation of cetacean bycatch. The workshop provided the opportunity

to introduce the Bycatch Mitigation Initiative to Indian Ocean stakeholders, build collaborations and assess how the initiative could be of use, such as through pilot projects or capacity development programmes. The workshop participants recognised bycatch as one of the most significant threats to cetaceans across the region, and that there is an urgent need to understand where bycatch is occurring and begin bycatch reduction programmes. The workshop report puts forward a number of recommendations for national governments, and relevant international bodies. It will be available online at <https://iwc.int/bycatch>.

The BMI has continued to engage with other relevant international bodies on bycatch matters (see Secretariat Progress Report on Cooperation with other Organisations). The BMI Coordinator will attend the FAO's workshop (in September 2019) to develop draft technical guidelines for reducing marine mammal bycatch. The BMI plans to continue engaging with the IOTC and other Regional Fisheries Management Organisations (based on an assessment of priority) and develop a strategy for participation.

For the remainder of 2019 and 2020 the BMI plans to focus on developing pilot projects, fundraising efforts to establish pilot projects and developing its network of collaborators.

### **3.2 Conservation Management Plans (CMPs) Standing Working Group, chair Suzi Heaton**

The Standing Working Group on Conservation Management Plans (SWG) has started to implement the actions in the revised CMP Work Plan, which was endorsed by the Commission at IWC67. Actions include:

- Developing a formal process for reviewing and updating the Commission's list of priority candidates for CMP development, to support the revised nomination and development process. At its meeting in Nairobi in May, the Scientific Committee's CMP Sub-Committee agreed to review potential CMP candidates at each of its meetings, and make clear recommendations to the SWG on which populations or species should progress straight to the CMP drafting stage (i.e. no nomination required), in line with the revised process.
- Promoting the CMP program. The SWG has updated the Commission's CMP website, and has published news articles promoting CMP achievements. The SWG plans to launch a biannual newsletter this year to promote the achievements and upcoming priorities of the CMP program. Conservation Committee members are invited to provide content for the newsletter at any time, including upcoming training and workshops, new research, and information about any of the cetaceans that are covered by CMPs. Content can be sent to [whales@environment.gov.au](mailto:whales@environment.gov.au).
- During the intersessional period, the SWG will continue to strengthen support for range states, including by compiling a list of skills and experience of CMP actors to support capacity building and mentoring.

The SWG has started to work with the Secretariat to explore external funding opportunities to support CMPs going forward. This is important as there are existing calls on the remaining CMP voluntary funds. The SWG is seeking ideas for pilot projects to test the external fundraising process developed by the Intersessional Correspondence Group on Strengthening Financing and the Secretariat. Once the SWG has tested the process, it will look at ways to broaden its use across all CMPs as appropriate. The SWG and SC Sub-Committee have agreed to report to each other on any funding requests they receive, to improve the fairness and transparency of using Commission funds for CMPs.

Efforts continue to develop new CMPs, including for the Mediterranean Fin Whale and the Arabian Sea Humpback Whale (for which a challenge remains to obtain formal agreement from Oman for CMP development).

The SWG will soon commence work on a thematic strategic plan for submission to IWC68. This will replace the current Work Plan, which is due to end in 2020.

### **3.3 *Ship Strikes Working Group, chair Dave Weller (USA)***

#### *High risk areas for ship strikes*

A joint IWC (CC and SC)-IUCN-ACCOBAMS workshop was held 5-6 April 2019 to evaluate how the data and process used to identify Important Marine Mammal Areas (IMMAs) can assist the IWC to identify areas of high risk for ship strikes. The recommendations from the meeting will help support the delivery of the IWC's Ship Strikes Strategic Plan.

The workshop found that IMMAs represent a systematic and biocentric approach to identifying important habitats that can be helpful in determining potential high-risk areas for ship strikes. In particular, if an IMMA contains a species or population that is vulnerable to ship strikes, and it is transited by significant shipping, the area can be 'flagged' for further investigation and potential mitigation. The workshop also outlined a series of steps that could be taken to help identify high risk areas for ship strikes based on IMMAs and asked the IWC Ship Strikes Working Group to develop some illustrative case studies that demonstrate the benefits, challenges and anticipated and actual costs of implementing measures to reduce ship strikes.

In May 2019, the report of this workshop was presented to the Scientific Committee and its recommendations were endorsed. The report, available as paper SC/68A/HIM/07, will also be presented to the Conservation Committee at its next meeting.

In addition, and in direct response to the recommendations at the workshop, WWF has initiated a GIS project to examine the overlap between ship traffic and IMMAs, at a global scale, to identify potential high-risk areas. Results of this work will be brought to the Scientific Committee in 2020.

#### *Ship Strikes database*

At SC 68A in May 2019, the IWC ship strike data coordinators reported on their seventh term of work conducted in the period between May 2018 and April 2019 (SC/68A/HIM14). During this time, efforts were dedicated to: (a) continuation of ongoing work, including updates and improvements to the existing reporting and recording system, (b) outreach and follow up to requests submitted by potential data providers (c) increased data review and record assessment and (d) updating of the global ship strikes database with new entries.

After consultation with the Data Review Group (DRG), the data coordinators have made significant process during the recent period of work, especially with regard to data evaluation. To date, all reports dating back to 31 December 1999 have been reviewed and assigned a category. In total, 384 reports have been assessed and are now listed as cases in the database, leaving only 118 earlier reports and any newly submitted reports to be evaluated.

Following on discussions at SC 68A, Weller convened a conference call in June with several of the NOAA ship strike database coordinators to: (a) assess the status of the existing US database, (b) discuss how to continue progress on record validation and data QA/QC, (c) determine the requisite data fields for the IWC database and how they correspond to those being used in the US database and (d) review measures that need to be taken by both the US and the IWC to allow for eventual batch upload to the IWC database.

### **3.4 Whale Watching Standing Working Group, chair Ryan Wulff (USA)**

At IWC67, the Commission endorsed the recommendations of the SWG-WW outlined in IWC/67/CC/04, including the revised Strategic Plan for Whale Watching and the work plan for the next intersessional period. The CC endorsed the Whale Watching Handbook, the communications strategy to promote it, and agreed the budget for its maintenance.

#### *Whale Watching Handbook*

The Whale Watching Handbook- was launched in October 2018 and is available at <https://wwhandbook.iwc.int/en/> . It has been widely promoted including on Twitter and at various events including the 2018 Conference of the Parties of the Convention on Biological Diversity (IWC Secretariat); a capacity-building partnership event at the UN Headquarters in New York (Miguel Iñiguez); the 5th International Conference on Marine Mammal Protected Areas (Gianna Minton and Jorge Urban); and the international Cambridge Student Conference for Conservation Science (IWC Secretariat).

A promotional poster and bookmarks have been produced as part of the outreach strategy. The impact of this outreach is assessed by the number of hits on the Handbook website. In the first four months the Handbook received nearly 31,000 page visits from over 10,000 separate visits, from 160 countries.

An update paper on the WW handbook was submitted to the Scientific Committee in May. The SC recommended that promotion and use of the IWC's Whale Watching Handbook continue, and agreed that an appropriate balance between positive and negative case studies is needed for future updates to the Handbook. In addition, it recommended the development of editorial guidelines for updating the Handbook.

Translation of the Handbook is continuing by the Convention on Migratory Species and discussions have been held with the CMS Secretariat on further opportunities for joint promotion.

As agreed at IWC67, funds from the Voluntary Conservation Fund will be used for the maintenance of the Handbook and a contract agreed soon.

#### *2019 Scientific Committee recommendations on Whale Watching*

As well as the recommendations on the Whale Watching Handbook above, the SC drew the attention of the Conservation Committee and the Commission on the need to update the IWC General Principles for Whale Watching, and made some suggestions in this regard. The SC drew attention to several locations where whale watching is a concern, and made recommendations on these issues. The Committee also agreed that the whale watching sub-committee should serve as an early adopter of the recommendations database, to assess and determine its maximum utility with regard to facilitating communication between and among various IWC committees.

#### *Indian Ocean Rim Association*

The first newsletter of the whale watching network of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) has been circulated and features an article on the WW Handbook.

### **3.5 Marine Debris**

Marine debris includes glass, metal, plastics and wood to abandoned or lost fishing gear. Much is synthetic and plastics may endure for hundreds of years. Different materials can threaten cetaceans, and other marine life in different ways. The IWC has worked on this issue through its Scientific Committee for some years, including holding workshops in 2013 and 2014 and also through the Scientific Committee's pollution-focused workstream.

Since the previous workshops, marine debris has become widely recognised as a major cause for concern, including by many other international bodies and reports of whales with their intestinal canals clogged with debris have become poignant symbols of the threat. Additionally, new concerns and information has arisen related to pernicious micro-debris.

The first IWC workshop was scientifically focused, analysing the different threats, knowledge gaps and further research requirements. The second workshop was policy-led, agreeing practical, management actions that the IWC could take in order to contribute its expertise most effectively to the each of the range of global initiatives on marine debris.

The third workshop will focus on a number of issues that have arisen in recent years including further defining the role of the IWC in addressing this issue and seeking to build liaison with other relevant international bodies; seeking to standardise relevant scientific techniques (such as pathology and classification of plastics); and compiling the latest information, including related to micro-debris.

At the present time

- All the necessary funding has been secured, including a generous donation from The Netherlands;
- The participants list is being finalised;
- Accommodation for the workshop is in being secured in La Garriga (a small town close to Barcelona to allow participants to also attend the World Conference on Marine Mammals being held there in December);
- The workshop dates have been agreed and will be 3-5 December;
- The workshop was discussed at the last meeting of the Scientific Committee and some amendments were made to the draft agenda (Annex 1).

The convenor, Mark Simmonds, would be pleased to receive nominations for participants by the end of this month (July). The meeting will be limited to about 25 participants.

### **3.6 *Ecosystem functioning***

Preparation for a Scientific Committee workshop on ecosystem functioning are ongoing. At its meeting in May 2019, the SC made recommendations on the Terms of Reference for the workshop. In addition, the Convention on Migratory Species has been consulted on opportunities for collaboration and co-hosting.

## **4. Developing work areas for the Conservation Committee**

Intersessional groups are working to further develop CC work programmes on anthropogenic underwater noise, chemical pollution and climate change. These will be taken under agenda item 6 of the CCPG agenda.

## Annex 1- Draft Agenda – IWC Marine Debris Workshop, La Garriga (near Barcelona), 3-5 December 2019

### Aims

In recognition of the growing evidence that marine debris is impacting cetaceans in a number of ways, including in some cases leading to mortality, this workshop will seek to logically progress the IWC's work on this topic to date, including the recommendations from its previous workshops. Specifically, it will seek to assess the scale and impact of marine debris on cetaceans and consider ways of mitigating impacts by:

- ☐ Review the latest evidence about interactions with cetaceans (both ingestion and entanglement) - also taking into account microdebris - and consider evidence for associated toxicology;
- ☐ Identify and initiate mechanisms to enhance data collection globally;
- ☐ Identify best protocols for -
  - o Gross pathology – to include consideration of ingestion and entanglement;
  - o Pathology for microdebris; and
  - o Standardised classification of recovered plastics and other debris
- ☐ Develop liaison with other relevant expert bodies including *inter alia* the Regional Sea Conventions (e.g. OSPAR or HELCOM), the Global Partnership on Marine Litter and the Global Ghost Gear Initiative, taking into account latest international commitments.

### Agenda

#### 1. Background

- 1.1 Review of contributions and recommendations from previous IWC workshops<sup>[1]</sup> and also recent work undertaken via CMS/ACCOBAMS/ASCOBANS, OSPAR, UNEP<sup>[2]</sup>; and SPREP.
- 1.2 Review of new key information since last workshop<sup>[3]</sup> - to include information about whale entanglement in active and lost gear;
- 1.2 New information about the 'micro-debris' threat; and
- 1.3 Consideration of lessons from other species (e.g. turtles and seabirds)

#### 2. Methodologies

- 2.1 Discussion of how to best collect and collate scattered information from cetaceans (identified as a key issue and opportunity for the IWC workstream)
- 2.2 Identification of 'best practice' in terms of protocols<sup>[4]</sup> for data collection, to include
  - a. Post-mortem investigations, including 'easy-to-collect' information from strandings and toxicology from plastic additives
  - b. Categorization of debris, including plastic types, microdebris and ghost gear
  - c. Consideration of extent of cetacean entanglement in debris versus entanglement in active gear
  - d. Mapping approaches

#### 3. Consideration of specific mitigation approaches for cetaceans

- ☐ Addressing 'ghost nets'
- ☐ Addressing Fishing Aggregation Devices (FADs)
- ☐ The role of litter streaming, clean-ups, recycling and biodegradables
- ☐ Identification of species/populations under particular threat of marine debris (i.e. hot-spots)
- ☐ Deep sea concerns

#### 4. Research recommendations and identification of priorities.

- ☐ Addressed to the IWC
- ☐ Addressed to other bodies/more generally

- ☐ Networking opportunities

5. Policy recommendations

- ☐ Addressed to the IWC
- ☐ Addressed to other bodies/more generally
- ☐ Potential comment to World Marine Mammal Conference
- ☐ Other outreach
- ☐ Networking opportunities