



*News Bulletin*

# July 2020



*Welcome to the second newsletter of a very unusual year. When we produced the first Bulletin back in February, we could not quite predict the difficult times ahead. I want to start by recognising the high standards in flexibility and resourcefulness that have been set by our Scientific Committee. I hope we are all inspired by the success of their virtual meeting, and able to approach our work with similar resilience, keeping IWC's challenging work programmes on track as much as possible in the months ahead.*

*The continuation of our work into 2021 is only possible because of the recent postal ballot. I would like to thank every government that engaged with this process and voted. We now have a one-year 'bridge budget' for 2021. The Commission will have an opportunity to discuss the long-term financial future of the IWC at its rescheduled meeting in September 2021.*

*We are all facing financial difficulties as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic and measures to fight it, and the IWC is no exception. Our budget deficit situation has not disappeared, and the global financial struggle may make it even harder to resolve. I encourage you to remain engaged on this issue. The deadline for payment of 2020 financial contributions was 30 June. The*

*Secretariat has yet to receive full contributions from 51 of the 88 member governments and everyone is urged to make payment now.*

*Please note that dates for the rescheduled Commission meeting are 3-10 September. You will appreciate that many events around the world have been postponed. It has not been easy to find dates where venues are available and that do not conflict with other relevant meetings. I encourage you to save these dates for IWC68.*

*Andrej Bibić,  
IWC Chair*

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## **IWC Budget and Contributions for 2020**

The Commission has voted to adopt a one-year bridge budget for 2021. A roll-over budget was presented with no increase in the financial contributions paid by Contracting Governments. The aim is to bridge the extended period until a Commission meeting is possible, and ensure that intersessional work can continue throughout 2021. A total of 46 governments voted to adopt the budget and there was one abstention.

Financial contributions for 2020 were due before 30 June and any member governments that have not yet paid are urged to do so. The extended intersessional period means other postal votes may be required and governments will not be able to cast a vote in any future ballot until the 2020 contributions have been paid.

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## **Working Group on Operational Effectiveness: update**

In February, the Working Group on Operational Effectiveness (WG-OE) sought comments on a suite of papers containing proposals for the Commission to consider at its next meeting. The papers covered organisational changes, strategic planning, and budgetary reform. The WG-OE wishes to ensure that all views of the Commission are considered in this process.

In light of Covid-19 and the postponement of IWC68, the WG-OE has revised its timetable and will use the longer intersessional period to further develop and refine the proposals. The aim of the WG-OE is to maximise

outreach and engage as widely as possible with IWC member governments and stakeholders. All those who have not already engaged are encouraged to do so and can use the extended period to consider the proposals and provide comments, in line with the revised timeline below.

**Ongoing:** incorporate comments received on the four initial draft proposals.

**Early Fall 2020:** interim, virtual WG-OE meeting to discuss revised proposals.

**Fall 2020:** circulate revised proposals to Commission for second round of comments.

**Spring 2021:** potential in-person WG-OE meeting around Scientific Committee Meeting.

**Summer 2021:** finalise proposals and submit to Commission for consideration at IWC68.

The WG-OE remains open to additional Member participation. Please contact [secretariat@iwc.int](mailto:secretariat@iwc.int) for more information.



## **Available now: report of the 2020 (virtual) meeting of the IWC Scientific Committee**

The report of the IWC Scientific Committee's annual meeting is published today. Covid-19 prevented the world's leading cetacean scientists from meeting in-person for the first time since 1955 but the Committee still found ways to discuss priority issues and provide advice to the Commission.

The 2020 meeting was planned to be in Cambridge, UK, but Covid-19 forced a

last-minute switch to a virtual meeting. This presented challenges including a greatly reduced agenda, limited chances for side meetings to tackle some of the more contentious topics, and inconvenient meeting times for many members around the world. However, a virtual meeting also offered opportunities. For example over 350 participants contributed, which is the highest attendance ever, with 25% attending for the first time.

Increased participation was not the only opportunity identified by the Scientific Committee in these current, challenging circumstances. Their report notes that the dramatic global reduction in human activity because of Covid-19 resulted in less ship traffic, less industrial activity and quieter oceans. This led to reports of cetaceans returning to areas they had previously avoided. The information gathered as a result of this unwelcome but essential global shutdown may provide scientists with insights into how cetaceans could respond to rapid environmental changes in the future.

Sadly, not all the news was positive. The brief reduction in human activity has not been enough to recover some species from endangered or critically endangered status. Thus, the Committee was still obliged to issue stark warnings. A growing number of cetaceans are candidates for urgent conservation action and the Committee discussed the need for [Conservation Management Plans](#), Task Team interventions or other urgent measures for several species, sub-species or stocks. These include humpback whales in the Arabian Sea and Central America, Mediterranean sperm whales, Bryde's whales in the Gulf of Mexico, Iberian Harbour Porpoise, and river dolphins in Southeast Asia and South America.

The strongest language was reserved for the vaquita, a small porpoise found only in the Upper Gulf of California, Mexico. The Committee expressed disappointment and frustration that, despite almost three decades of repeated warnings, the vaquita now hovers on the edge of extinction because of gillnet entanglement and ineffective fisheries management and enforcement measures.

Bycatch in gillnets and other fishing gear remains the single most important threat to cetaceans, and is estimated to kill more than 300,000 animals a year. This year's Scientific Committee received an update from the IWC's Bycatch Mitigation Initiative which is currently developing multi-disciplinary pilot projects, investigating new and experimental approaches to tackling bycatch. This work was strongly endorsed by the Commission, as was the collaborative, multi-level approach taken by both the IWC's Bycatch and Entanglement Response Initiatives. The success of these projects led the Scientific Committee to recommend a similar model for a new initiative to understand and tackle the

threat of collision between vessels and cetaceans, known as ship strikes.

The challenges of Covid-19 led the Scientific Committee to find new ways to manage some of their discussions and provide advice to the Commission. The Committee produced a set of recommendations and detailed record of discussions of the items that could be addressed in 2020. The report of the 2020 meeting is free to download and available [here](#). In 2021, the Committee looks forward to again meeting in person to address the many important agenda items that could not be discussed this year.

To read the 2020 report of the IWC Scientific Committee click [here](#).

To read previous reports of the IWC Scientific Committee, click [here](#).

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## **Conservation Committee to hold virtual meeting in September**

In consultation with the Bureau, the Conservation Committee has confirmed plans to hold a virtual, 5-day meeting later this year. Drawing on the experiences of the Scientific Committee, the Conservation Committee will hold one session each day and each session will be limited to two hours.

The meeting will focus on issues that most urgently need to be progressed or for which decisions are required before the end of 2020, but will not seek to cover all of the Conservation Committee agenda. Key discussion items include new workplans for both the Bycatch Mitigation Initiative and for Ship Strikes, new content for the Whale Watching Handbook (see below) and an update on the Small Cetacean Task Team.

The dates of the meeting are 28 September to 2 October 2020.

[Read more](#)

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## **IWC Strandings Initiative: providing remote back-up on a global scale**

The Strandings Initiative (SI) began work in 2018. As well as capacity building on strandings response, mass strandings and necropsy, the SI established a remote, real-time support capability. Members of the Strandings Expert Panel provide advice to responders dealing with stranded animals in circumstances that are wide-ranging and often difficult: from remote or even dangerous locations, to public beaches facing TV crews and intense public scrutiny.

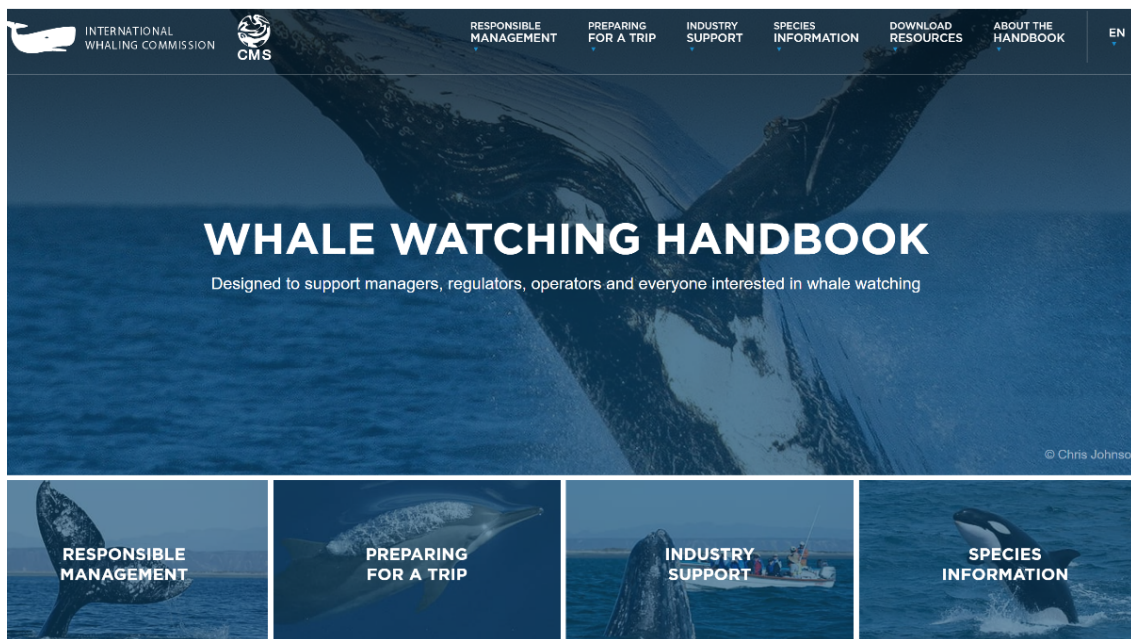
The group prioritises regions where existing strandings response capability is not yet fully functioning, but will provide assistance wherever possible. A private social media group enables sharing of information including photographs, data and templates for recording information consistently.

Access to long-distance and real-time advice from a multi-disciplinary group of strandings experts has proved hugely valuable around the world and demand continues to grow. In the last year, activity included an attempted blue whale necropsy in Costa Rica, response to a pod of live killer whales in Genova Port, Italy and then Haifa Port, Israel, a field necropsy in Lebanon, two separate stranding incidents in Taiwan, humpback whale euthanasia in Namibia, entrapped killer whales in Norway, strandings investigations in Kenya and Mozambique, and an Arnoux's beaked whale in New Zealand. Panel members have led necropsies via cellphone, diagnosed disease on What's App and given advice on a mass stranding on Socotra Island, Yemen, where response efforts were hampered by military clashes.



Having established a truly global reach, the Expert Panel plans to expand membership and add new members from Africa, the Indian Ocean and the South Pacific. A new, four-year workplan is also being developed. The workplan covers all the activities undertaken as part of the Strandings Initiative. It will be fully costed and voluntary funds will be sought in order to maintain and build on the success of this valuable programme.

[Read more](#)



## New content for the Whale Watching Handbook

This month, a range of new material will be added to the IWC Whale Watching Handbook. The Handbook aims to provide comprehensive, impartial advice on responsible whale watching to all those with an interest: operators, regulators and members of the public planning whale watching trips.

Since its launch in October 2018, the Handbook has received visitors from 205 countries and averages 160 visitors per day. Its success has led to requests for additional material. As well as extending the number of country profiles, whale watching case studies and species pages, the update contains a new series of introductory factsheets on topics including cetacean anatomy, feeding, habitats and threats. The factsheets were produced in response to feedback from whale watching operators seeking to enhance the educational value of trips. They will also be used on the IWC website.

[Read more](#)



## **Covid-19 and the Secretariat**

There can be very few people on the planet who have not been affected by Covid-19. Like many others, staff at the Secretariat have been working from home with the added challenges of caring for vulnerable relatives and friends, and home schooling. To play a small part in the effort to entertain and educate children, the Secretariat ran a 'Species of the Week' competition through the IWC website.

Children were invited to use the Whale Watching Handbook to find the answers to three questions on a specific species, and send a drawing or painting of that species. The competition ran for six weeks and as you can see, generated some fantastic artwork which is proudly displayed on the website.

Home working has been a big success at the Secretariat and credit goes to the IT team who made the transition as seamless as possible. This has led to a re-assessment of long-term working practices. Around the world, many observers have spoken of the need to look again at the relationship we have with our environment post Covid-19, and ensure that the vast recovery programme required takes a new approach. The phrases 'Build Back Better' and 'One Health – human, environmental and economic' are gathering momentum and at the Secretariat, we are considering how we might play our part.

New, more flexible working arrangements, less international travel, and increased use of technology might allow us to reduce our carbon footprint and make financial savings. It's hoped that these changes in one small office in Cambridge, UK, become part of a much bigger movement that manages to create something positive from the very difficult times we have all shared in Covid-19.



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## Staff changes at the Secretariat

Global lockdown is not an easy time to start a new role and certainly added an extra dimension to the learning curve for three new members of the Secretariat.

Moussa Ki Sow joined the IT Department in March. Originally from Burkina Faso, Moussa has also lived and worked in Cuba and Spain, and is fluent in French, Spanish and English. Most importantly, Moussa is fluent in IT! He holds an MSc in Information Technology and has

extensive experience as an analyst, project manager, webmaster and web developer. Moussa arrived just in time to manage the technology for the first ever virtual meeting of the Scientific Committee and is now developing a long-term strategy for the many IWC databases.



Dr. Imogen Webster is the Secretariat's new Programme Development Officer. Imogen's early career in travel was mainly based in Austria and Switzerland. Volunteering on a wide variety of conservation projects led to a PhD in Mauritius, studying spinner and bottlenose dolphins, before returning to her native Australia and working for

Murdoch University. Imogen has spent over seven years as a research scientist and coordinator in the western Indian Ocean and has a particular interest in that region as well as in the impacts of whale and dolphin watching interactions. Imogen joined the Secretariat in February and is already leading Secretariat work on a range of programmes including new long-term strategies for ship strikes and underwater noise.

Dr. Iain Staniland formally joined the Secretariat at the end of June although he had already managed to attend the virtual Scientific Committee in May, where he was welcomed to the IWC by the familiar faces of many former colleagues and friends. Iain will lead the team supporting the Scientific Committee and

science function at the Secretariat. A marine mammal ecologist, he has a wide-ranging scientific background and joins the IWC from the British Antarctic Survey (BAS) where he led research into Antarctic fur seal ecology. As well as 10+ Antarctic fieldwork campaigns, Iain represented BAS at a range of international fora and has extensive experience in science management. He is also committed to improving science communication and has worked with national and specialist media, online campaigns and schools to make science more accessible.



Greg Donovan, the Secretariat's long-standing Head of Science, has moved into the role of Secretariat Scientist Emeritus. This one-year post has been created primarily to provide the space and time for Greg to complete several legacy papers related to the Revised Management Procedure and Aboriginal Subsistence Whaling Management. He will also assist Iain as necessary during the year. Greg will be working for the Secretariat for the equivalent of two days each week. In his own time, he will work as a Scientific Committee Invited Participant and Convenor of the Sub-Committee on Implementation Simulation Trials. Greg has provided the IWC, and especially the Scientific Committee, with advice and support for 43 years. The Committee will not be surprised to hear that he remains as committed as ever.

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