

Comments from the Scientific Committee regarding selected agenda items of the Conservation Committee meeting, 28 September-2 October 2020

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Introduction

The IWC Scientific Committee (SC) met in Nairobi in 2019, although several delegations and other members were not able to attend for a variety of reasons. There were plans for the SC to meet in Cambridge in 2020 but because of Covid-19, the SC met virtually instead. They addressed the most important agenda items but were forced to postpone numerous items until 2021 due to time limitations. Many of the agenda items common between the SC and the Conservation Committee (CC) were addressed in both years. More detailed information can be found in the SC reports from 2019 and 2020 (https://archive.iwc.int/pages/search.php?search=!collection73&bc_from=themes).

The SC expressed concern about the impact of Covid-19 on on-going research and monitoring of cetaceans. Much research was cancelled or postponed in 2020. The SC strongly requested that *“governments and research organizations be as flexible and proactive as possible to ensure that, where feasible and safe, vital long-term monitoring projects are able to continue”*. While there were concerns about impacts, Covid-19 also provides opportunities because of the reduction of human activity in the marine environment. The SC urged increased *“efforts to evaluate potential changes in cetacean behavior and habitat in areas where human presence has been substantially affected by the pandemic.”*

Below is a brief summary of the SC discussions and recommendations about Bycatch (HIM), Whale Watching (WW), Conservation Management Plans (CMP), Ship Strikes (HIM), Marine Debris (E), and Small Cetaceans (SM). The item numbers correspond to the CC agenda items for 2020.

Scientific Committee comments on specific Conservation Committee Agenda Items

6. Bycatch

The SC addressed issues related to bycatch under the sub-committee on Human Induced Mortality (HIM) with further discussions in the sub-committees on Small Cetaceans and Conservation Management Plans. Additional details can be found in Item 13 and Item 12 in the 2019 and 2020 SC reports, respectively.

The SC reviewed progress and strongly endorsed the work of the IWC’s Bycatch Mitigation Initiative (BMI) and recommended continuation of this work. The BMI has focused on identifying priority countries for pilot project development and engagement with Regional Fisheries Management Organisations (RFMOs) and the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO). The SC agreed to further support

the BMI by including in the SC workplan the activities identified in the draft BMI Workplan for 2021-2024. The SC encouraged funding be available to support bycatch research. The SC recognized that the Ecuadorian artisanal drift gillnet fisheries is a potential candidate for a BMI pilot project to explore bycatch mitigation options.

The SC reviewed research on bycatch of common dolphins in the Bay of Biscay, harbor porpoises in the Baltic Sea, Māui and Hector's dolphins in New Zealand, and expressed serious concern for the status of these populations. The SC recommended that the relevant range states urgently take action to reduce or eliminate bycatch. Specific recommendations by the SC for each of these populations are found in the 2019 and 2020 SC reports.

Research on cetacean bycatch in shark nets in South Africa was reviewed by the SC in 2019. Of particular concern is the status of the endangered Indian Ocean humpback dolphin, which are incidentally killed by these nets. The SC recommended additional research to understand cetacean habitat use prior to net deployment and additional efforts to determine and test alternatives to shark nets. The SC also recommended that a request by the government of South Africa for advice on development of a national programme to monitor and mitigate marine mammal bycatch be referred to the Bycatch Expert Panel.

The SC discussed research on cetacean bycatch in the Indian Ocean, highlighting the limited data available for assessing bycatch across the region, and opportunities for the BMI to contribute towards mitigation trials and potential for further collaboration with the IOTC. The SC reviewed the report of a workshop on Bycatch Mitigation Opportunities in the western Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea and endorsed recommendations therein, particularly highlighting the need for integration of social-economic information and multi-disciplinary approaches to reduce bycatch. It particularly highlighted recommendations that: (1) national governments should strengthen bycatch assessment, monitoring and reduction programmes as a matter of urgency; (2) that the BMI explore means of more consistent and sustainable approaches for funding bycatch mitigation efforts; (3) multi-disciplinary efforts are needed; and (4) the IWC and IOTC should collaborate more closely to address cetacean bycatch

The SC reviewed research on mitigation measures for preventing bycatch and entanglement and noted that in many situations no technical options will be available to effectively reduced bycatch and the only solution will be to stop using high-risk fishing gear. The SC recommended further development and testing of simple technology or low-cost devices that might reduce cetacean bycatch. The SC endorsed the 'for the safe and humane handling and release of bycaught small cetaceans from fishing gear' (Hamer and Minton, 2020) that could be combined with training for large whale disentanglement already performed by the IWC.

The SC expressed appreciation for statements by the European Union (EU) Commissioner on the 'EU action on bycatch of dolphins and other marine animals' and urged EU and IWC member states to implement effective measures to reduce bycatch throughout European waters. The SC also recommended cross-border and cross-agency cooperation with fishers and among countries to monitor and mitigate bycatch. The SC highlighted the need for increased and robust monitoring of fishing effort and bycatch rates and for guidance by the European Commission to ensure improved data collection. Finally, the SC

recommended the European Commission implements emergency measures to reduce bycatch of Northeast Atlantic common dolphins (including in the Bay of Biscay) and considers developing emergency measures for Iberian and Baltic harbor porpoises.

The SC discussed the engagement of the IWC's BMI with Regional Fisheries Management Organisations, including a draft review of RFMO actions to address cetacean bycatch. The SC recommended that the BMI (1) prioritises collaboration with IOTC, ICCAT, SPRFMO, and SIOFA, with further scoping of work plan activities; (2) works alongside other RFMOs, in collaboration with the FAO, to develop baseline cetacean bycatch related requirements; (3) further develops its collaboration with the BMIS to review existing information, provide new information on mitigation and provides the BMIS with access to safe handling and release guides/information/material and species identification guides. collaboration with the FAO and RFMOs to build awareness and capacity to implement the FAO Technical Guidelines to reduce bycatch of marine mammals in capture fisheries and; (2) collaboration with the FAO and Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) and the South Pacific Community (SPC) to contribute technical information for BMIS and BDEP, and; (3) raising awareness within the IWC Community of these tools.

7. Whale watching

Details about the discussions and progress of the SC on issues related to Whale Watching can be found in Item 18 and Item 17 in the 2019 and 2020 SC reports, respectively. The SC continues to promote the development of scientific models to assess the impacts of whale watching on baleen whales and review relevant studies. In 2019, the SC endorsed revisions to the IWC General Principles for whale watching, which were last updated in 1996, and recommends the CC and Commission review, approve and adopt the revised principles. Regional reviews of whale watching operations are on-going in various locations including Timor-Leste, Sri Lanka, Peru, Chile, Ecuador and other Latin American countries. The SC encourages the continued development and implementation of whale watching regulations but has concerns about the possible impacts to cetaceans from the growing number of illegal or unregulated whale watching operations that occur in some locations. The SC also recognizes the need to enhance interactions with the CC's SWG-WW, particularly regarding the Whale Watching Handbook.

8. Conservation Management Plans

Considerable details from discussions of the SC are available in Item 10 and Item 9 in the 2019 and 2020 SC Reports, respectively.

8.1.1 Progress on current CMPs

8.1.1.1 Western Pacific gray whale

The SC reiterated the importance of long-term monitoring of gray whales and their habitats across their range. It would be helpful if all range states supported such work. It welcomed new information, especially the continued work of the range-wide assessment. The SC supports the plan to hold a scientific workshop prior to SC68C. Concern was expressed about the increase in strandings, poor body condition, and reduced numbers of calves in both 2019 and 2020 in the eastern Pacific Ocean. Fortunately, there

were no signs of similar conditions in the summer range of western gray whales near Shakalin Island, Russian Federation.

8.1.1.2 Southwest Atlantic southern right whale

The SC reiterated the importance of the CMP for SW Atlantic southern right whales and commends and encourages the continuation of the vast amount of collaborative research being conducted by range states. The SC reiterates the importance of long-term monitoring and encourages satellite tagging, research on stress hormones measurable in baleen, and comparisons among photo catalogues. The SC also encourages range states to allow their employees to continue to be engaged in disentanglement training.

8.1.1.3 Southeast Pacific southern right whale

The SC reiterated the importance of the CMP for this critically endangered population and welcomed the progress made since the initial implementation of the CMP, the new information and progress on priorities in the CMP but also draws attention to the need for funding. Chile and Peru were commended for advancing the CMP and encouraged to continue the cooperation for the passive acoustic monitoring project.

8.1.1.4 Franciscana

The SC stressed the value of the actions included in the CMP towards future assessments and recommended efforts to estimate abundance and bycatch across its range and collection of genetic samples for answering questions about stock status. The review of franciscana should continue and the SC recommended that a workshop be organized prior to SC68C.

8.2 Future CMPs

8.2.1 Arabian Sea humpback whales

The SC reiterated that Arabian Sea humpback whales are a priority candidate for a CMP and recommended that the Secretariat and CC SWG-CMP continue to work with Oman and India towards development of a CMP. The Arabian Sea Whale Network and other scientists have developed a strong scientific basis to guide the development of a CMP. The SC recommends continued research on this group of whales using passive acoustic monitoring, unmanned aerial systems and other photographic methods. Concern was expressed about possible impacts from entanglement and recommended that fishing effort be mapped and encouraged continued collaboration between the Pakistan observer programme and the IWC BMI with efforts to broaden the collaboration.

8.2.2 Mediterranean fin whales

ACCOBAMS has adopted the IWC guidelines for CMPs. The SC welcomed progress made by ACCOBAMS in developing a CMP for Mediterranean fin whales. The SC encouraged the range states to work towards finalizing a draft CMP for presentation at SC68C.

8.2.3 Mediterranean sperm whales

The SC recommended that Mediterranean sperm whales be treated as a priority population for development of a CMP. Consideration should be given that this CMP be a joint effort with ACCOBAMS.

8.2.4 South American river dolphins

In 2020, the SC strongly endorsed the scientific components of the South American river dolphin CMP nomination in principle. It wants to dedicate more time for a thorough review during SC68C. Meeting virtually in May 2020 severely limited the amount of time available for a robust review. The SC (1) encouraged the proponents to prepare a draft CMP, pending discussion at the CC, (2) established an intersessional correspondence group to advance discussions about the scientific matters and priorities to be included in a draft CMP, (3) encouraged the range states to work with the IWC's BMI (because bycatch has been identified as a conservation risk to river dolphins), and (4) suggested the proponents appoint a full-time coordinator for the draft plan.

8.2.5 Asian river dolphins

The SC reiterated its previous great concern about the status of Asian freshwater cetaceans and agreed that discussions to develop a CMP for these species should continue at the next meeting.

8.2.6 Central American humpback whales

The SC recommended that Central American humpback whales be treated as a priority population for development of a CMP. The SC also recommended continued and increased collaboration of the range states; in part this could occur in a workshop to develop a draft CMP to be presented at SC68C.

9. Ship Strikes

The SC addressed issues related to ship strikes under the sub-committee on Human Induced Mortality (HIM). Details can be found in Item 14 and Item 13 in the 2019 and 2020 SC reports, respectively. The ship strikes database now holds 933 separate cases including 250 new reports in the last year. Work continues to add several large known databases and it was noted that planned intersessional work on National progress reports will simplify and hopefully increase data submission.

There was recognition of the potential to detect overlap in vessel movements based on Automated Information System (AIS) data with Important Marine Mammal areas, and thus identify high risk areas. Careful consideration should be given to possible biases (e.g. repeat traffic, slower vessels and smaller non-AIS vessel activity). To this end the Secretariat and the HIM Convenor recently met with MarineTraffic in regard to improving access to AIS data.

With regard to Ship Strikes in high risk areas, the SC encouraged trials of thermal cameras on ferries in the Canary Islands as a possible mitigation measure. It also welcomed the proposed submission by range states of an IMO Particularly Sensitive Sea Area (PSSA) to include the Mediterranean coast of Spain, the Pelagos Sanctuary and a cetacean migratory corridor. The Secretariat was asked to contact the

government of Sri Lanka to continue dialogue on re-routing of shipping and to request an update from the government of Greece regarding progress on mitigation measures on the Hellenic Trench. The International Association of Antarctic Tour Operators (IAATO) reported full compliance with mandatory measures to mitigate ship strike risk around the Antarctic Peninsula.

The SC endorsed the proposed structure for IWC work on ship strikes which includes the Ship Strikes working group, an Expert Panel and the creation of a ship strikes coordinator position within the Secretariat. In addition to maintaining its current ship strikes work, the SC agreed to review methods of estimating vessel traffic for vessels without AIS and for reducing ship strike risks for specific shipping sectors such as fast ferries and support vessels for the oil and gas or renewable energy industries.

11. Marine debris

The Environmental Concerns sub-committee addresses marine debris within the SC. Additional details of SC progress on this topic can be found in Item 15 and Item 14 of the 2019 and 2020 SC reports, respectively. The SC reiterates the threat to cetaceans from marine debris. They welcomed and endorsed the recommendations from the IWC Workshop on Marine Debris and encouraged the communication and implementation of the workshop recommendation to all relevant stakeholders. The SC also recognizes the need for standardized data collection, including for post-mortem examinations of marine mammals, and will continue to advance efforts in this regard.

12.1 Anthropogenic underwater noise

The SC addressed issues related to underwater noise under the sub-committee on Environmental Concerns. Additional details can be found in Item 15 and Item 14 in the 2019 and 2020 SC reports, respectively.

The committee recognised the threats posed to cetaceans and other marine animals, encouraging activity exclusion as an effective mitigation approach, and endorsed the IMO goal of reducing underwater shipping noise by 3 dB/decade. A 3 hour online pre-meeting with 70 participants discussed advancing efforts to address underwater noise from shipping, with talks focused on ambient sound, noise budgets and indicators (SC/68B/REP/06). It was agreed to revisit collaboration with the IMO after the Marine Environment Protection Committee (MEPC) takes up pending papers on underwater noise. The establishment of a database of ship source levels and intersessional work to further collaborate with the Conservation Committee was encouraged.

12.2 Climate change

The SC addressed issues related to climate change under the sub-committee on Environmental Concerns. Additional details can be found in Item 15 and Item 14 in the in the 2019 and 2020 SC reports, respectively.

The Committee concluded that management of the effects of climate change needs to be swifter and more precautionary. Climate change was recognised to potentially interact with almost all the stressors of concern to the Committee.

The need to assess the impact of climate drivers on South African southern right whale populations was highlighted along with strong support for the Australian systematic long-term Right whale monitoring programmes investigating potential links between calving intervals, health and climate.

The Committee approved support for an inter-sessional workshop on climate change to focus on improved integration of the issue into the work of the IWC, identify research priorities to fill knowledge gaps and priority areas for mitigation and management.

14. Small Cetaceans

The SC addressed small cetacean issues under their purview, as well as new and emerging challenges. Details can be found in Item 17 and Item 16 in the 2019 and 2020 SC reports, respectively.

Given unsustainable levels of bycatch of Iberian harbour porpoise, ICES was requested to provide advice on emergency fishery measures, and the matter will be brought to the attention of the range states and the European Commission. Despite three decades of repeated warnings, bycatch in the Gulf of California, Mexico, continues to drive the vaquita towards extinction. The few remaining vaquita are healthy and continue to reproduce, however the presence of illegal gillnets continues to threaten this species on the brink. The two populations of Lahille's bottlenose dolphin found in Brazil and Argentina/Uruguay are likely threatened due to bycatch and other human threats, leading to a recommendation to form a Task Team to coordinate regional efforts and address bycatch, whilst exploring synergies with the franciscana CMP.

The SC recommended continued collaboration amongst regional institutions in addressing the status of the four species of threatened Indian Ocean humpback dolphins. Concerns about the status of critically endangered Atlantic humpback dolphins are increasing with little progress in addressing threats. The Africa-focused Sousa task team, with members from 14 African countries, tackled the lack of funding and poor coordination across range states and has recommended a focus on two highest-priority short-term actions to implement the CMS Concerted Action Program and conduct a field survey in Senegal/Gambia.

Asian freshwater cetaceans and Amazon River dolphins face a wide array of threats throughout their range, and the sub-committee made a number of recommendations to ensure collaboration in the monitoring and mitigation of these threats, including community-level interventions.

Recognizing the new information gleaned from the 3rd Aquatic Wildmeat workshop series, the SC recommended the ICG prepare a report of the three workshops at SC68C. The SC reviewed the work of the Small cetacean task teams and provided specific guidance on priorities. Two workshops held on the Guiana dolphin in 2018 and 2019 resulted in an action plan which was endorsed by the SC.

The voluntary fund for small cetaceans currently totals £71,413.00. There was no expenditure in 2020.

Discussion of possible extinctions amongst small cetaceans led to the formation of an intersessional correspondence group to advance an initiative to actively engage in outreach and awareness.

Reference

Hamer, D.J. and Minton, G. 2020. Guidelines for the safe and humane handling and release of bycaught small cetaceans from fishing gear. A report to WWF, project AS51. 53pp.