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Environmental Investigation Agency Opening Statement for the International Whaling Commission's Virtual Special Meeting 8th – 10th September 2021

Representatives of the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) are pleased to attend the IWC's Virtual Special Meeting (VSM). We sincerely thank the Chair Andrej Bibič, Executive Secretary Rebecca Lent, Members of the Bureau and the Secretariat Staff Members for organising this important meeting at this difficult time. We look forward to a successful meeting that will contribute to improving the conservation status of cetaceans around the world.

EIA has participated as an IWC Registered Observer in the work of the IWC for three and a half decades. We have experienced the growth of the organisation into a global leader for the protection of cetaceans and marine habitats, working in collaboration with a large number of other intergovernmental organisations.

Since the IWC was established 75 years ago, the health of the ocean has dramatically deteriorated as a result of human activities. In 1946, industrial commercial whaling was the greatest threat to great whales. The moratorium on commercial whaling, implemented thirty-five years ago, has enabled populations of great whales on the brink of extinction to begin their slow recovery. But today, all cetacean species are threatened by a complex cocktail of human impacts, including *inter alia* climate change, chemical, noise and plastic pollution, prey depletion and bycatch.

For over three decades, the IWC has been developing its unique expertise in tackling threats to cetaceans and their marine ecosystems. It is increasing its understanding of the vital importance of ecosystem services cetaceans provide to marine ecosystems and their economic benefit to the global economy.

As the IWC approaches its 75th Anniversary and the first year of the United Nations' Decade of Ocean Science, the next 50 years will be critical for mankind and the global environment. It is time for Contracting Governments and Observers to work together to ensure the IWC has the capacity and resources to increase its vital work so that it can effectively protect cetaceans and the ocean environment for generations to come.

The IWC's Budget Crisis

To build the strength and expertise of the IWC it is imperative that Contracting Governments effectively address the budget crisis to enable continuation of the IWC's vital work. We recommend that the Commission's 2022 Bridge Budget is adopted.

We commend the Budgetary Sub-Committee's (BSC) endeavours to tackle the IWC's financial crisis and the leadership work it has contributed to the reform process. As noted by the BSC, adopting deficit budgets is not sustainable and could eventually lead to the Commission running out of money. The Commission's governance reform process provides a good opportunity to undertake a more holistic review of the Commission's financial processes.

Working Group on Operational Effectiveness (WGOE) Reform Process

EIA is pleased to be a member of the WGOE and commends its work. EIA participates in the WGOE meetings and has contributed comments on the reform proposal papers circulated by the Working Group. We thank all WGOE participants for their hard work and particularly the UK and USA as its Co-Chairs and Australia for its leadership on the budgetary reform process.

As concluded by the independent review panel and IWC Contracting Governments, it is essential that the IWC adopts reforms that will introduce international best practice, strengthen its vital work and provide budgetary security in the long term.

We urge Contracting Governments to contribute to WGOE consultations and strongly support the reform process.

The Plastics Crisis

Marine plastic pollution is now recognised as a major global threat to ocean and ecosystems health, biodiversity, livelihoods and wild animal conservation and welfare. Up to 13 million tonnes of plastic leak into our oceans each year, and 51 trillion plastic particles are already present in the marine environment..

More than 800 marine species have been documented as impacted by plastic pollution either through ingestion, toxin absorption, entanglement, disruption of feeding patterns and reproductive issues. Reports on entanglement and ingestion suggest that 50% of seabirds, almost 66% of marine mammals and 100% of sea turtles suffer from ingestion of and/or entanglement in plastic debris.

Over the last decade, momentum within the IWC to address plastic pollution and other marine debris issues has been building. Marine debris has been a standing item on the Conservation Committee's agenda since 2011 and the Scientific Committee since 2014. In 2018, an Intersessional Correspondence Group on Marine Debris was established to take forward the IWC's marine debris work.

The IWC has an important global role and mandate in understanding and addressing the significant impacts of plastic pollution on cetaceans, and should take the opportunity of IWC68 to acknowledge this role, support a comprehensive work programme to be undertaken by the Scientific and Conservation Committees, and set out a clear plan for engagement in the broader global context, including support for a new global treaty to bring existing efforts under one umbrella and tackle the problem upstream. Such a treaty that covers the entire lifecycle of plastic would ensure that flows of plastic pollution into the marine environment over time will be tangibly prevented and reduced, offering the chance for cleaner, healthier and productive oceans.

Plight of the vaquita

We are desperately concerned about the plight of the vaquita with only about 10 individuals remaining. For decades the IWC's Scientific Committee and this Commission, through three resolutions, has warned of the decline and impending extinction of the vaquita unless gillnets are completely eliminated from vaquita habitat. Legislation aimed at protecting the vaquita has been repeatedly undermined by poor implementation and enforcement, and it appears that recent new legislation will suffer the same fate. The vaquita is on the precipice of extinction and there are very real concerns that it may not survive another illegal fishing season.

We urge IWC contracting governments to voice their concerns at this Special meeting and respectfully request that the Secretariat urgently submit a letter to Mexico's President to share this concern and to ask how the IWC and its member governments and observer organizations can help protect the vaquita. We also urge governments to bilaterally reach out to Mexico, to offer assistance, financial and otherwise, to help Mexico save the vaquita from extinction.

Belugas and Narwhals

EIA is also deeply concerned about the threats posed to Arctic and sub-Arctic whales, such as belugas and narwhals, by a rapidly changing climate and associated increases in industrialisation and shipping in their habitat. We are particularly concerned about the proposed expansion of the Mary River Mine in Baffinland, Canada and its likely effects on populations of narwhals which are shared between Canada and Greenland. Narwhals are particularly sensitive to noise, including shipping noise, which is expected to increase dramatically with expansion of the mine. We urge the IWC Scientific Committee to revisit the expansion proposal and to make appropriate, precautionary recommendations to the Commission.

We are also very concerned about the continued decline of the Cook Inlet beluga population in Alaska. The Cook Inlet beluga whale population is critically endangered and declining at 2.3% per year, with the most recent estimate from 2018 suggesting only 279 Cook Inlet beluga whales remain in a population that once numbered approximately 1,300 individuals. Management and recovery efforts for this population have totally failed and precautionary action must be taken immediately to reverse their alarming trend toward extinction. This should include the capping of "takes" of this population authorised by the National Marine Fisheries Service in the U.S. as well as a review of the efficacy of the Recovery Plan to avoid extinction. We urge the IWC Scientific Committee to comprehensively review the status of Cook Inlet Beluga Whales and their management and to make appropriate, precautionary recommendations to the Commission.

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