

# **SC/68D/CMP/06**

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**IWC Eastern South Pacific Southern Right Whale Conservation Management Plan –  
Progress Report April 2022**

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## Abstract

The eastern South Pacific southern right whale population found off Chile and Peru is one of the most threatened whale populations worldwide. This population is listed on the IUCN Red List as Critically Endangered. The International Whaling Commission adopted a Conservation Management Plan (CMP) for this population and the Governments of Chile and Peru signed a Memorandum of Understanding. Important advances have been made since last year CMP virtual coordination meeting, including progress on the Passive Acoustic Monitoring project and the collection of photo-IDs. Now that Covid-19 pandemic restrictions are being lifted, important activities such as the workshop experience exchange on whale watching and research permits, that have been delayed are expected to take place during the second half of 2022. The CMP has proved to be a key framework to facilitate the implementation of conservation measures for this Critically Endangered population and to enhance international collaboration for their long-term recovery.

## Introduction

The geographical range of the Eastern South Pacific population of southern right whales (*Eubalaena australis*) comprises the waters of Chile and Peru. Historically abundant, this population was classified as Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List in 2008 due to the impacts of commercial whaling that reduced its numbers to a current estimate of less than 50 mature individuals. Depleted by the 1850's, the southern right whale population of Chile and Peru has not shown any signs of recovery.

Efforts to protect this whale population include the adoption of a Conservation Management Plan (CMP) by the International Whaling Commission (IWC) in 2012 (Galletti Vernazzani *et al.*, 2016) and a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Chile and Peru in 2018 (MOU, 2018).

The CMP aims to guide and encourage Range States, stakeholders and international partners to take steps towards the recovery of this population to levels that will allow the species to withstand both environmental and anthropogenic impacts and ensure its long-term survival.

Over these years significant advances have been made and the new Implementation Strategy 2021-2023 was endorsed in 2021 (IWC, 2021). Priority actions in short term includes the Passive Acoustic Monitoring (PAM) project, workshop on experience exchange on whale watching and research permits, and the 6-year review of the CMP.

This report summarizes advances made from April 2021 to March 2022.

## Reporting at SC68c

In May 2021, the 68c meeting of IWC Scientific Committee was held virtually. The report of the Third CMP virtual coordination meeting conducted in April 2021 and preliminary results from PAM project were presented (IWC, 2021).

*The Committee reiterates the importance of the CMP for the conservation of the critically endangered Southeast Pacific southern right whale population (IWC, 2019a, p.28). The Committee welcomes the progress made and draws attention to the need for funding to continue to conduct the PAM field work and to develop a workshop and meeting to review and update the CMP.*

*The Committee:*

- (1) **commends** the scientific work and international cooperation being undertaken for the PAM (passive acoustic monitoring) project and **congratulates** the researchers for the results, which will assist in designing future sighting surveys and providing baseline information on the location of breeding grounds.
- (2) **notes** the importance of increasing information about the presence of the species in southern Chile, which could merit additional monitoring efforts.
- (3) **endorses** the proposed workshop and coordination meeting to review and update the CMP.

#### **Fourth CMP coordination meeting and Workshop on Experience Exchange**

The implementation of the CMP requires strong support from different organizations and commitment from the Range States. The CMP Steering Committee has stressed that the conduction of annual coordination meetings is critical to ensure its long-term continuation and integration to national policies.

A workshop on experience exchange about whale watching regulations and research permits has been identified as a priority action. The CMP provides an excellent opportunity to standardize measures in both countries and have consistent regulations that facilitate the protection of individuals and/or collection of samples.

Initially scheduled to take place between 2019-2020 in Lima Peru, the workshop has been postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is expected to be conducted in-person in Lima, Peru on August 2022. Back to back, the fourth CMP coordination meeting will focus on the 6-year CMP review. If required, a second coordination meeting may be conducted virtually before next IWC plenary in October 2022.

#### **6-year CMP review**

The Committee agreed to conduct a 6-year CMP review for this population in 2022.

A virtual expert workshop will review historical and recent data on Chile-Peru southern right whales to inform and update the scientific information under the CMP. This workshop is planned to take place between June-July 2022.

Topics covered at the expert workshop includes historical catches, population structure, distribution, migration and movements, basic biology, abundance and trends, as well as their threats, risk assessment and possible mitigation measures.

Invited participants includes researchers of Chile, Peru and other experts that have conducted or are involved with southern right whale research/conservation.

The 6-year review also considers a hybrid in-person/virtual meeting with CMP Steering Committee to review the CMP. This will be done at the fourth CMP coordination meeting in Lima, Peru.

#### **Passive acoustic monitoring**

Another CMP short-term priority is to identify a breeding aggregation area for this population. Since 2016, the IWC Scientific Committee has been supporting the project "*Passive Acoustic Monitoring (PAM) of the Eastern South Pacific population of southern right whales, a key to increase the results of the CMP*", with the aim to facilitate the identification of potential breeding areas along the coast of Chile and Peru.

This is the first project to use passive acoustic monitoring (PAM) for this population in the entire Eastern South Pacific. One year of acoustic data have been recorded off Isla de Chiloe between 2018-2019 and five months off Arauco Gulf between 2019-2020. Analysis of acoustic data has been completed for these two large datasets providing important information about the presence of this population at Isla de Chiloé (Rojas-Cerda, 2022).

Due to restrictions from the Covid-19 pandemic, one equipment was lost at Arauco Gulf and monitoring off Antofagasta region has been systematically postponed. Recently, the first deployment of the acoustic equipment at Antofagasta region occurred on 19 March 2022 (S23° 54' 26.5"- W70° 31' 36.6", depth 143m).

### **Increase efforts to collect photo-identifications**

Collaboration has been essential in recording sightings of the species. During 2021, at least six opportunistic sightings were recorded in the coast of Chile thanks to the information provided by different groups and institutions contributing to the Southern Right Whale Sighting Network. These included a total of three cow-calf pair.

The first record was reported in 24 July 2021 and corresponded to a cow-calf pair sighted in Taltal, northern Chile. The other cow-calf pair occurred at Corral, southern Chile in 23 August 2021. Also during September there have been new sightings of cow-calf pair at Golfo de Penas. Recent cow-calf pair sightings reported almost all years since 2017 in that area highlights the need to further investigate this location as potential breeding area.

Exceptional sightings of southern right whales occurred at northwestern Isla de Chiloé during summer 2022. On 07 February, one group of three whales was sighted. Defecation was also recorded. On 16 February, three additional groups totaling four southern right whales were recorded. This unusual aggregation of different groups is perhaps the largest recorded to date. The whales were most probably feeding in the area. Surface Active Groups have already been reported off Isla Chiloé on 2011 and 2020. These new sighting records further strengthen the increasing evidence about the importance of Isla de Chiloé for this population.

A new technology could help improve photo-ID collection and assess the health status of Chile's Critically Endangered southern right whale population. Sightings are rare and distant in space and time that assessing the population status cannot be done with conventional methods. Drones offer a novel technological tool that can greatly contribute to their conservation. They can identify individual whales with aerial photographs and give data to measure their size and body condition (photogrammetry). A workshop has been proposed to build capacity in Chile for drone-based research on SRW and start gathering important data to assess health status of this population. Dr. Christiansen will be able to conduct the training workshop and assist with data analysis.

### **Discussion and conclusions**

Travel funds have already been secured for the in-person workshop on experience exchange and fourth coordination meeting for the 6-year review. Expert virtual workshop don't require funding. These meeting will be crucial to improve CMP strategies for the next 6-years.

Important advances have been made under the PAM project. Analyzes of available acoustic datasets are finished and monitoring Antofagasta region is ongoing. However, due to limited funding to cover Antofagasta, it will only be possible to cover aprox. 8-10 months. Additional funding would be required to cover extra months needed to complete one-year coverage.

A Peruvian oceanographer specialist will participate at maintenance of the equipment in Antofagasta and later implement the project in Peru between 2023-2024. Funding has already been secured for these activities.

In addition, CEAZA has offered to contribute a hydrophone - that require few maintenances over a year – to monitor Golfo de Penas. The first deployment of the acoustic equipment could be contributed by the Research Center of Patagonian Ecosystems (CIEP in Spanish). The PAM has already considered as next location site to monitor Golfo de Penas and therefore an additional equipment would be great to avoid delays until other places are completed. It is therefore expected to deploy acoustic equipment at Golfo de Penas during 2023. After completing data collection from Antofagasta, Peru and Golfo de Penas, almost all distribution range

would have been covered.

The project and workshop on photogrammetry and photo-identification to assess health status of southern right whales, has also been considered a priority action under the CMP but has not yet been funded.

Coordination efforts have proved to be essential for the effective and positive implementation of the eastern South Pacific southern right whale CMP. It is expected to continue to work collaborative for the conservation of this population and to implement the activities planned during 2022-2023.

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