

# **SC/68D/E/13**

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**Update on Progress of the IWC Strandings Initiative May 2021 – April 2022**

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**INTERNATIONAL  
WHALING COMMISSION**

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## ABSTRACT

This paper provides a progress update for the IWC Strandings Initiative from May 2021 - April 2022 and details of planned upcoming work. A draft new four-year workplan was presented at the meeting of the Scientific Committee in 2021 (SC/68C/E/17) along with a revision of staffing and organization in order to better respond to emergencies and training requests. New members were added and the Chair has been confirmed to 2023. In addition, work is underway to explore the relationship between the IWC Strandings Initiative and other initiatives. In addition, an update is given on Strandings Initiative funding. The Scientific Committee is invited to note this update and comment on the recommendations posed below.

## INTRODUCTION

The IWC Strandings Initiative is currently at its 5 years, after being established in 2017 endorsing the recommendations of the Scientific Committee (SC) and the Whale Killing Methods and Welfare Issues Working Group (WKM&WI WG). The Terms of Reference have been reviewed and confirmed with the main goal of this initiative as supporting Countries asking for advice for emergency situation and training events dealing with cetaceans welfare and health concerns. The initiative included the establishment of a Strandings Expert Panel (SEP) and Strandings Coordinator post. Dr Karen Stockin (April 2018-December 2019) and then Dr. Andrew Brownlow (Jan-Sept 2020) were enrolled to support the SEP Chair with different roles and tasks in guiding the Stranding Initiative (SI). In the first three years, the SI was structured defining criteria and priorities to respond to emergency and training requests as well as identifying geographical gaps in the IWC SEP response which was well summarized in the four-year workplan presented during the SC meeting in 2021.

In order to fill the identified gaps, in May 2020 (SC68a) the Scientific Committee (SC) endorsed the need to expand the membership including representatives from key areas. Additionally, during the SC meeting in 2021, the structure of the SI was reviewed resulting in an update to the Terms of Reference and composition of the Steering Group (SG) because there was a need for a revised organization of the SEP to enable proper response to the several requests worldwide. In details, the identification of regional focal points was suggested as well as underlying the strong need for a Stranding Coordinator position in the IWC Secretariat to support the SEP during numerous requests receive by the SI.

## PROGRESS

The current pandemic has affected the activities of the IWC SEP also during this year limiting any training on site and possible support in the field in case of emergencies. Despite these limitations, the request of assistance, advice and support increased in the last 12 months, as reported here below.

Progress since May 2021 has included:

- Expert Panel remote response to assistance and advice requests associated with stranding events, again mainly in the Indian Oceans and African waters including. In addition to events followed directly in their own area, the EP provide remote assistance in the following cases:  
. Mauritius: mass stranding *Penoplocephala electra* (53) August-September 2020 (doc IWC68/E14): the SEP has been engaged by the Government and the request of support on site arrived in Nov 2021.

The organization of a training on site is ongoing; . Sri Lanka: after the mass stranding of *Globicephala macrorhynchus* (120) occurred in November 2020, a naval incident occurred in May-June 2021 with the ship-wreck of the MV Pearl-X Press occurred far from Colombo shores due to chemical substances and plastic nurdles spill. The SEP has been contacted and involved in the support of the response Provision of advice from the Expert Panel was facilitated using e mail correspondence, the Expert Panel “What’s app group” and one to one assistance by cell phone.

- Engagement with Arabian Sea Whale Network (ASWN)– the SEP chair with online meeting supporting the creation of the local stranding response also during necropsy with online and remote advice.
- Engagement with the Cambodia Government, WWF and Cambodian Mekong Dolphin Conservation Project for a remote advice on necropsy. Contacts is still ongoing.
- Continuing engagement with IGOs (ASCOBANS, ACCOBAMS, NAMMCO, IUCN) and other external organizations (NOAA, IFAW) to strengthen cooperation on training, also implementing remote tools.

## **SI STEERING GROUP**

Since the SC recommended that the membership of the Steering Group (SG) be refreshed, and a Chair be nominated, a meeting was organized on September 27th 2021. During the meeting the Terms of Reference (TOR) were revised and clarified. It was noted that the SG are there to hear feedback from the implementors and should have good links not only to the SC but to countries and other organisations. The TOR also provided guidance on the SG role in promoting the work of the SWG and fund raising. The SG was there to support the EP and take some of the workload off, letting the panel focus on its response work, as opposed to adding more bureaucracy to the process. The SG was about facilitation, and promoting the work of the SWG, making connections at meetings and workshops.

It was agreed in line with the SG recommendation that the membership of the group needed to be refreshed with less overlap between the EP and SG membership and more representation from Governments. It was also agreed that members of Contracting Government delegations, e.g., Acting Commissioners, and regional representatives should be encouraged to serve. Lent offered to send a circular to Governments to promote this. Membership of the SIG is currently being reviewed to ensure compliance with the Rules of Procedure outlined in both sets of Terms of Reference (old and new).

No volunteers to Chair the Steering Group were forthcoming, and Imogen Webster (Secretariat) agreed to continue coordinating the work on a temporary basis until the position could be filled.

During the meeting the “Hybrid model- Regional focal points with Secretariat providing administrative support identifying a part-time stranding coordinator” presented in SC/68C/E/15 was confirmed. Furthermore, the workplan (SC/68C/E/17) already revised and discussed by the SC and SEP was adopted.

During the meeting, the need to interact and liaise with other initiatives was strongly encouraged. In particular, a cooperation with the stranding data and report initiatives ongoing in Europe (ACCOBAMS/ASCOBANS/HELCOM) were suggested as well as with the Global Stranding Network. Currently the Global Strandings Network website hosts a large number of public protocols and relevant pdfs and assists information exchange on strandings response. Finally, it was suggested that the SI should look to sign an agreement with the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) who oversee standards relating to animal health and zoonoses.

## **SEP MEETING**

During the last SEP Virtual Meeting (April 1st 2022), the Regional Focal points were discussed and persons appointed. Their role will be helping and facilitating communication particularly from a political and cultural point of view knowing the regional areas. The regional contact will also help with communications between relevant organizations in the area such as Office International des Epizoties/World Organization for Animal Health (OIE-WOAH). OIE has identified laboratories around the world who can help depending on the area and facilities. They can assist with advice and lab work but they are not connected to the world of marine mammals: regional focal points could help in this action. Geographical areas and identified SEP members are the following:

1. Western Africa – Antonio Fernandez with the support from Ursula Siebert and Andrew Brownlow
2. Eastern Africa/Indian Ocean (till Sri Lanka) – Stephanie Plön with the support of Sandro Mazzariol
3. Eastern Asia – Nantarika Chansue with the support Chalatip Junchompoo.
4. Central Pacific – Kristi West.
5. South America – Andre Barreto with the support of Gaby Hernandez (Central America) and Michel Vely (Caribbean)

Fernandez said he can help with mapping out the possible connections.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

With the expanse of the SEP particularly in the last two years an in-person meeting of the SEP is strongly needed. This meeting would greatly assist in the exchange and comparison of procedures to harmonise approaches, and define roles and competencies.

Furthermore, interaction with relevant world organisations dealing with animal health and conservation such as OIE, IUCN and CITES is strongly needed to harmonise responses, integrate resources and avoiding overlap, but also to create a common and strong response supporting Countries without a functional stranding response.