

Report of the Joint CC/SC Intersessional Group on Climate Change

Submitted by Mark Simmonds, Chair of the CC/SC Intersessional Group on Climate Change

The Conservation Committee is requested to:

- *note the progress made by the intersessional group;*
- *endorse recommendations from the workshop; and*
- *discuss and provide input on future steps for the intersessional group*

INTRODUCTION

The IWC first considered the implications of climate change for its work in the early 1990s. Historically, it has been difficult to provide meaningful advice on how to characterize, quantify and manage the effects of climate change on cetaceans. This is because the availability of key information and predictive power were both limited. The situation has changed dramatically since then, as knowledge of cetacean biology, and ability to model population trends have improved.

There is now strong evidence of distributional shifts in some cetacean and prey species, which are likely to be the consequence of the changing climate. Whilst the cetacean movements may suggest some ability to adapt, the extent is unknown and may be forcing cetaceans into new waters containing new or more intensive threats, for example movement into shipping lanes or areas of concentrated fishing activity.

The IWC has held five workshops on climate change, the first in 1996 and the second in 2009 in response to the 4th Assessment Report from the Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change (IPCC). The recommendations from the 2009 workshop were endorsed at IWC63 and resulted in the Resolution on Climate and Other Environmental Changes and Cetaceans ([CO0901](#)). The third, in 2010, focused on potential impacts on small cetaceans, and identified those populations living in restricted habitats, such as estuaries, rivers and shallow waters, as less likely to adapt to changing circumstances. A fourth, in 2014, assessed the impacts of increased marine activities on cetaceans in the Arctic where climate change has already significantly altered the marine ecosystem.

RESULTS FROM THE 2021 VIRTUAL WORKSHOP

In 2020, the Scientific Committee approved a proposal to hold an in-person workshop on climate change. The Conservation Committee subsequently agreed at its meeting that year to partner in the workshop and representatives of the CC joined the intersessional group which acted as the steering committee for the proposed workshop. When it became apparent that an in-person workshop was not possible, planning for a smaller virtual workshop began in early 2021. The joint CC/SC Climate Change Virtual Workshop consisted of three three-hour sessions on November 30th and December 1st and 3rd at times meant to maximise participation from around the world. In total there were 20 presentations and 66 participants from 21 countries attended. The workshop heard and discussed a variety of issues, including: (i) details of the IPCC's most recent assessments, (ii) "rebuilding baleen whale ecosystems"; (iii) the designation of Important Marine Mammal Areas (IMMAs); and (iv) recent developments related to climate change in the Bering, Chukchi and Beaufort Seas. Cavanagh and colleagues from the British Antarctic Survey also presented on the effects of climate change on Southern Ocean ecosystems, with a focus on synergies

between the work of the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR) and the IWC.

Following review by participants, the workshop report was posted online in March 2022¹. The report acknowledged that, due to the workshop's shortened and virtual nature, not all elements of the planned agenda had been completed. The workshop suggested prioritising research and conservation measures in regions experiencing particularly intense climate-driven environmental and biological changes, especially on cetacean habitat (for example, where these regions overlap with IUCN-defined IMMAs). It was emphasised that climate change acts in concert with other stressors and that it is particularly challenging to understand the resulting cumulative effects which needs multi-disciplinary approaches. The workshop also explored how cetaceans can be used as sentinel species to detect or better understand marine ecosystem changes. Recommendations also included that the IWC seek funding to appoint a Climate Change Coordinator to “generate a set of guidelines, standards and protocols for maximising the global utility of cetacean monitoring programmes and risk assessments from anthropogenic threats with respect to understanding the implications of climate change”. This work would facilitate coordinated design of monitoring programmes and help to ensure that data sets are comparable for analyses. The workshop also recommended that a further workshop be convened to look at issues that had not been fully considered and to take forward some of the existing recommendations.

The Scientific Committee received the report of the workshop at its 2022 meeting (SC68D) and endorsed its recommendations. It also commented that it “**encourages** further work, recognising the importance of continuing the integration of new information on climate change impacts to cetacean populations into its work” and that “Whilst a second workshop, intended as an in-person meeting, could not be supported at this time the Committee **encourages** the Climate Change Steering Group to promote integration of climate change aspects within the work of all relevant sub-committees.”

The workshop [report](#) and its recommendations will now be presented to the Conservation Committee at IWC68 for endorsement.

FUTURE WORK

Climate change is an issue of high importance to the IWC, but progress has been limited with the last full workshop having been held in 2014. The 2021 CC/SC climate change virtual workshop produced two tables of recommendations for future research and these included to “incorporate multi-disciplinary considerations at the study design stage and identify collaborations with other environmental sciences (e.g. deep-sea, climate, cryosphere)”.

The Conservation Committee is requested to provide input on the next steps for this joint intersessional group and specifically how work and impact can be improved. In order to facilitate this, a draft workplan is provided as Annex A.

¹ <https://iwc.int/resources/media-resources/news/climate-change-workshop-report-is-published>

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ANNEX A

Draft Work Plan for Joint CC/SC Climate Change Intersessional Group for 2022-2024

- i. Monitor the relevant literature and provide updates to the SC and CC as appropriate;
- ii. Review the outputs from the 2021 virtual IWC climate change workshop and seek ways to take forward its recommendations;
- iii. Suggest ways in which the Conservation Committee can progress work on climate change and potentially improve the effectiveness of its recommendations for management and conservation actions through consideration of climate-induced impacts or changes; and
- iv. Further build synergies in these endeavours with other international organisations.