

## Report of the Standing Working Group on Whale Watching

*Submitted by the Chair of the Standing Working Group on Whale Watching (SWG-WW)*

### **The Commission is requested to:**

- *note the intersessional progress made by the Whale Watching Standing Working Group and the Conservation Committee*
- *adopt the proposed workplan of the Standing Working Group of Whale watching*
- *Endorse the Editorial Protocol for the Whale Watching Handbook and the updated IWC General Principles for Whale watching*

### **WORKPLAN 2022-2024**

At its meeting in 2020 the Conservation Committee endorsed the modest workplan for WW in 2021 focused on the WW Handbook and agreed to develop a three-year workplan on WW for consideration at IWC68.

The draft Work Plan for 2022- 2024 (Annex 1), was developed over the recent intersessional period and transmitted for review at the Conservation Committee Planning Group meeting in July 2022. It is now ready for endorsement at IWC68.

### **IWC WHALE WATCHING HANDBOOK**

#### *Overview of content*

The Whale Watching Handbook was launched in October 2018 and is available at <https://wwhandbook.iwc.int/en/>. Since the launch, work on the Handbook has focused on content consolidation and expansion, working with CMS to finalise and upload translations for all existing and new content, minor updates to existing content requested by countries/data providers, and updating the searchable table of literature annually to include new peer-reviewed literature and data presented to each Scientific Committee meeting. Gianna Minton was hired to help coordinate and carry out this work. The most recent update to the searchable table of literature in the Handbook was updated with new information in December 2021, at the end of Minton's contract. The table now features the details and abstracts of 501 reports and peer-reviewed journal articles on whale watching.

As of April 2022, thanks to generous support from the CMS, all existing content has been translated from English into both French and Spanish, and these translations have been uploaded to the site. In December 2021, Minton trained several Secretariat staff members on how to maintain, edit, and update the Handbook content. The Secretariat will now continue to collaborate with countries to implement any updates or requests, as well as begin scoping for new content.

Future updates to the handbook will be carried out in accordance with the editorial protocol discussed and supported at SC68B. This editorial protocol (Annex 2) needs to be revised for endorsement by the CC and the commission. There have recently been two requests for minor changes to the WW Handbook. More information has been suggested for the Bowhead whale page, and we have been informed of some changes to WW regulations in Norway. According to the editorial protocol, these are being discussed and will be approved following adoption of the protocol by the Commission. The Secretariat is looking for future funding opportunities to support both promotion and ongoing translations to Handbook content as needed.

### *Promotion of Handbook*

Analysis of Handbook use from its launch in 2018 to April 2022 shows that visitor numbers continue to climb slowly and now average 170 individual visitors per day. Whilst the Handbook had been accessed by people in 205 countries, the majority of visitors used the English language section rather than the French or Spanish pages. The outreach plan is in the process of being updated but the three main aims remain the same: 1) to identify key opportunities to raise awareness of the Handbook within specific audiences, (for example when new content is published); 2) to generate a regular flow of information about the Handbook on social media; and 3) to increase awareness of the French and Spanish language sections. In April 2020 a 'Species of the Week' feature was launched using the IWC website and Twitter feed, with simple quiz questions, the answers to which can be found on the relevant species page of the Handbook. In recognition of the unique home-schooling arrangements in place in many countries at the beginning of the pandemic, a children's artwork competition is part of Species of the Week.

At its meeting in September 2020, the Conservation Committee endorsed a whale watching workplan for 2021 including a focus on promotion of the Handbook. In 2021, promotional activities were built around the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the IWC and included dissemination of the Handbook's factsheets via schools and the main IWC website and flagging the Handbook in a range of presentations and articles. The IWC has also collaborated with Environmental, Coastal and Offshore Magazine (ECO) on a special edition focused on marine mammals. This was published in April 2022 and included an [article](#) about the Handbook. The Conservation database, which is currently being developed, could potentially be linked to the WW handbook, as another means to increase visitor numbers to this valuable resource. The revised outreach plan is in development by the Secretariat and will be sent to the SWG-WW when complete. In the meantime, all suggestions for promotional activity are welcome.

### **IWC PRINCIPLES AND GUIDELINES FOR WHALE WATCHING**

At its meeting in 2019 (SC68A) the SC drew attention to the need to update the IWC General Principles for Whale Watching, which had not been updated since 1996, and recommended the approval and adoption of a revised document, which was drafted and approved by the SC WW Subcommittee during SC68A. The primary changes were to incorporate issues that have arisen or become more prominent within the whale watching industry over the past 20+ years (e.g., swimming with whales and the emergence of new technologies, such as drones). These revisions were subsequently endorsed by the SWG-WW and transmitted to the CC meeting in September/October 2020 for further discussion. The CC took note of the adjustments made by the SC and the comments made during the meeting and concluded that changes to the Principles require further examination. The delay to IWC68 allowed a further round of comments to be conducted in 2021 including both the SWG-WW and the WW Subcommittee members and the revised document is included in (Annex 3). The General Principles are now presented to the Commission for endorsement.

### **COOPERATION WITH OTHER ORGANISATIONS**

The Secretariat has continued ongoing co-operation with the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS), and its ASCOBANS and ACCOBAMS agreements, on a wide range of common challenges. Each organisation's Executive Secretary has visited the headquarters offices of her counterpart to meet with staff and discuss areas of mutual interest.

Joint work has continued with CMS on the IWC Whale Watching Handbook (particularly translations). Both the CC and SC WW groups have provided input to the CMS Guidelines for in-water interactions with wildlife in February 2022, and the revised document is expected to be ready soon.

### **COMMUNICATION BETWEEN THE CC AND SC**

At SC68B, the Scientific Committee noted an ongoing need to effectively interact with the CC and the SWG-WW generally, but in particular with regard to the Whale Watching Handbook. At a meeting prior to SC68C it was agreed that the mechanism for SC input to the Handbook was set out well in the Editorial Protocol for the Handbook and that, in addition, the SC could contact the Secretariat focal point (Imogen Webster) with input and suggestions. The Secretariat, in liaison with the SWG-WW Chair, would then have responsibility for ensuring SC input to the Handbook, as set out in the Editorial Protocol. The SWG welcomed input from the new Convenors of the Sub-committee on Whale watching, Suydam and Urban-Ramirez.

During SC68D, it was noted that very few submissions concerning WW had been received. The CC may be able to assist with this as part of the communication plan.

#### *Membership of the CC Standing Working Group*

The Chair of the SWG-WW and Convenor of the SC WW Sub-committee discussed SC representation on the SWG-WW at a meeting in early 2021. It was proposed that the Convenor of the SC WW Sub-committee, along with either the Chair or Vice Chair of the SC and one more SC representative be included in the SWG-WW. The WW Sub-committee agreed to this proposal at SC68C, however changes in leadership for the SC and the Sub-committee in 2022 meant representatives needed to be updated again. At SC68D it was agreed that Suydam and Urbán -Ramirez would join the SWG along with Parsons, a representative of the SC WW Sub Committee. There are still two vacancies on the SWG-WW for industry as ex officio members, the SWG-WW is asking for suggestions for these industry representatives.

**Annex 1**

**DRAFT Whale Watching Workplan 2022-2024**

The Whale Watching Strategic Plan provides the overarching vision for the period 2018-2024. High level objectives presented in the workplan below directly correspond to the three objectives identified as the key components of the Strategic Plan. There is a suite of short-, medium-, and long-term actions associated with each objective. Short-term actions are taken to be those which can be delivered within two years of the adoption of the Strategic Plan, with medium-term actions delivered over five years. Two long-term actions are identified in this iteration of the Strategic Plan: (1) Continued development of the digital Whale Watching Handbook, and (2) Development of an integrated research plan.

The Whale Watching Handbook (Handbook), the SC Sub-committee on Whale Watching, and the Standing Working Group on Whale Watching will be important mechanisms through which these objectives can be achieved.

High level objective & Description of activity	Timeframe			Lead	IWC community involved	Budget per year/ total budget	Potential funding source(s)	Priority Core= essential Top High Medium
	2022	2023	2024					
<b>Objective 1: Information Sharing</b> Identify methods to facilitate cooperation and information/expertise-sharing between Contracting Parties and others to support the development of a responsible whale-watching sector, including the provision of benefits to local communities.								
1.1 Use the Handbook to continue to improve industry and public access to data, information, and research results	x	x	x	Standing Working Group on Whale Watching	SC Sub-Committee on Whale Watching, Secretariat			
1.2 Ongoing maintenance of the IWC WW Handbook including: -Scoping of new content -Regular updating the searchable table of literature -Modest updates to existing content requested by countries/data providers	x	x	x	Standing Working Group on Whale Watching, Secretariat	SC Sub-Committee on Whale Watching			

1.3 Further development of IWC WW Handbook including: - development of new content		x	x	Secretariat	Standing Working Group on Whale Watching, SC Sub-Committee on Whale Watching			
1.4 Promotion of the WW Handbook and related resources (communication strategy) - Researchers - Whale watching managers - Naturalists - Operators - Public	x	x	x	Secretariat, Standing Working Group on Whale Watching,	SC Sub-Committee on Whale Watching, IWC community			Top
1.5 Review of implementation of the IWC Strategic Plan to date to help identify priorities. * Within two years of commencing work on the actions outlined, this Working Group aims to undertake a comprehensive review of outputs to allow activities to be refocused, if required.	x			Standing Working Group on Whale Watching,	SC Sub-Committee on Whale Watching, Secretariat			
1.6 Draft new Strategic Plan 2025-2035 (10year)			x	Standing Working Group on Whale Watching,	SC Sub-Committee on Whale Watching, Secretariat			Medium
<b>Objective 2: Capacity Building and International Collaboration</b> Support the development of a responsible whale watching sector and the provision of benefits to local communities.								
2.1 Identify, on a regional basis, specific capacity building, research and development needs. In particular, those (or including those) providing long-term benefits for the livelihood of local communities.	x	x	x	Standing Working Group on Whale Watching	BMI (Secretariat), SC Sub-committee on WW			

2.2 Continue to Support the IORA Network on Sustainable Whale Watching	x	x	x	SC Sub-committee on WW, intersessional correspondence group for cooperation with IORA	Standing Working Group on Whale Watching			High
2.3 Identify and list in the Handbook, funding and development organisations able to offer assistance relevant to the establishment and maintenance of whale watching operations at varying scales.	x	x	x	Standing Working Group on Whale Watching	Secretariat, SC Sub-Committee on Whale Watching, IWC community			
2.4 Work with relevant international bodies, industry associations and outside expertise, to develop guidance and training tools in the Handbook that address occupational health and safety aspects of whale watching operations.	x	x	x	Standing Working Group on Whale Watching	Secretariat, SC Sub-Committee on Whale Watching, IWC community			
2.5 Investigate and promote best practices on cost-effective monitoring and compliance regimes and alternative strategies to promote environmentally responsible whale watching.	x	x	x	Standing Working Group on Whale Watching, Secretariat	SC Sub-Committee on Whale Watching, IWC community			
2.6 Identify and work with key partners and priority organizations who might contribute to the vision and objectives/goals.	x	x	x	Secretariat, Standing Working Group on Whale Watching	SC Sub-Committee on Whale Watching, IWC community			
<b>Objective 3: Research and Data Collection</b> Continue to develop the necessary research principles and tools to assist the collection of data important to ensuring that whale watching (1) does not significantly and adversely affect the behaviours and fitness of individual cetaceans or populations or their habitats and (2) realizes its potential benefits, e.g., educating the public, positively affecting attitudes toward conservation, improving local economies								

<p>3.1 Continue the Modelling and Assessment of Whale Watching Impacts (MAWI) initiative, to develop tools and methodologies to assist researchers and managers in their efforts to assess potential impacts of whale watching on cetaceans and to mitigate them. This initiative is ongoing and could focus on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Investigating modelling methods to link short- (e.g., behavioural reactions) and medium-term (e.g., changes in population distribution) responses with potential impacts from whale watching to long-term (i.e., &gt;10 to 20 years) consequences (e.g., vital rates).</li> <li>• Establishing standard data collection methodologies, including from platforms of opportunity.</li> <li>• Identifying key locations for whale watching research projects and programmes, taking into consideration logistics, capacity and management urgency;</li> </ul>	x			SC Sub-Committee on Whale Watching, MAWI	Standing Working Group on Whale Watching			
<p>3.2 Develop a long-term integrated research programme to better understand the potential impacts of whale watching on the demographic parameters of cetacean populations. Seek to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Investigate whether there is a causal relationship between whale watching exposure and the survival and vital rates of exposed cetacean individuals and populations;</li> <li>• Understand the mechanisms involved in causal effects, if they exist, in order to define a framework for improved management</li> </ul>	x	x	x	SC Sub-Committee on Whale Watching	Standing Working Group on Whale Watching			

3.3 Develop processes and mechanisms for whale watching activities to collect and provide scientifically robust and useful data to researchers and research programmes	x	x	x	SC Sub-Committee on Whale Watching	Standing Working Group on Whale Watching			
3.4 Develop an approach (e.g., hold an intersessional workshop; establish a joint intersessional working group) to integrate social and ecological scientific research within the IWC to inform whale watching management and promote potential benefits.	x	x	x	Standing Working Group on Whale Watching	SC Sub-Committee on Whale Watching			



## Annex 2

# Draft Editorial Protocol for updating the Whale Watching Handbook

### General Principles

The Whale Watching Handbook is designed to support managers, regulators, operators and anyone interested in whale watching. It is a flexible and evolving tool incorporating international best practice, educational resources and a summary of the latest, relevant scientific information.

The Handbook meets these principles by ensuring robust information, recorded factually and neutrally.

Wherever possible, images are incorporated onto web pages, to support the text and enhance presentation.

### Practical Guidance

The Secretariat is responsible for overseeing, maintaining, developing and updating the Watching Handbook in line with the principles above and the process below. The IWC works in partnership with the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) who generously provide translation of the Handbook into French and Spanish.

Additional categories of content to be included will be identified in consultation with the Whale Watching Standing Working Group of the Conservation Committee and/or the Whale Watching Sub-Committee of the Scientific Committee.

Content is developed by national governments, local specialists, the IWC Secretariat and its contractor(s), and members of its Scientific Committee and Conservation Committees. The following principles apply:

- Case studies – All case studies will be signed off by the Commissioner of the country in question. Subsequent edits will also be signed off by the Commissioner, in consultation with any earlier contributors as appropriate.
- Country profiles – all country profiles will be developed by the IWC Commissioner for that country or designated alternatives, or by the Secretariat in collaboration with the IWC Commissioner/designated alternates. All country profiles, and subsequent edits, will be signed off by the Commissioner of the country in question.
- Species accounts - all will be reviewed by at least one external expert and internally in the Secretariat.

All other pages – will be reviewed by the Secretariat and reviewers with relevant expertise.

All pages will be edited by the Secretariat to ensure coherence of style and format across the site as a whole.

### The Scientific Committee

The Secretariat will provide an update to the Scientific Committee on modifications made to the WW Handbook content and seek feedback and suggestions for future updates. The Secretariat will also consult intersessionally as appropriate. CC/68A/7.1/01 2 11 September 2020

### Role of the Conservation Committee

The Secretariat will provide an update to the Conservation Committee on modifications made to the WW Handbook content and seek feedback and suggestions for future updates. The Secretariat will also consult intersessionally as appropriate.

#### Convention on Migratory Species

The IWC and CMS are working in partnership on the Handbook. The CMS Secretariat will seek feedback as appropriate from its members on the Handbook. CMS Contracting Governments may also submit country profiles, for inclusion in the Handbook. This may include CMS members that are not members of the IWC.

## Annex 3

# General Principles for Whale Watching

### DRAFT REVISIONS OF GENERAL PRINCIPLES FOR WHALE WATCHING<sup>1</sup>

(major additions given in *italics*; major deletions in ~~strikeout~~)

- (1) MANAGE<sup>2</sup> THE DEVELOPMENT OF WHALE WATCHING TO MINIMISE THE RISK OF ADVERSE IMPACTS:
- i. *land-based whale watching minimises adverse impacts on cetaceans and the marine environment and should be ~~developed~~ the preferred means where possible;*
  - ii. implement, as appropriate, measures to regulate platform<sup>3</sup> numbers and size, activity, frequency and length of exposure in encounters with individuals and groups of whales;
    - o management measures may include closed seasons or areas where required to provide additional protection;
    - o ideally, undertake an early assessment of the numbers, distribution and other characteristics of the target population/s in an area;
  - iii. promote whale watching activities that do not harass/disturb the cetaceans (i.e., do not interrupt essential behaviours such as feeding, nursing, mating, resting, etc.);
  - iv. establish approach distances for vessels to maintain safety for the whales and vessel passengers;
  - v. establish approach distances for drones to maintain safety for the whales;
  - vi. *avoid the development of operations that include direct interactions between humans and cetaceans, such as swimming with or provisioning (feeding) the target species;*
    - o *where such operations are currently in existence, they should be strictly regulated, monitored and evaluated, to minimise the potential impacts on both humans and cetaceans*
  - vii. monitor the effectiveness of management provisions and modify them as required to accommodate new information;
  - viii. where new whale watching operations are evolving, start cautiously, moderating activity until sufficient information is available on which to base any further development;
    - o *where possible, begin with land-based whale watching in conjunction with research, to minimise adverse impacts and to improve understanding of population/s being targeted;*
    - o *support the development of Codes of Conduct, either voluntary or as regulations, to define approach guidelines and the conduct of passengers and operators, so as to minimise adverse impacts;*
  - ix. *as new and evolving technologies~~technology~~ becomes available (e.g., drones), start cautiously and limit their use until sufficient information on their potential impacts is available on which to base any further development;*
  - x. implement scientific research, *using all possible platforms*, population monitoring and collection of information on operation~~target~~ cetaceans and possible impacts, ~~including those on the acoustic environment~~, as an early and integral component of management, *including;*
    - o *the acoustic environment;*
    - o *habitat quality;*
    - o *emerging technology; and*
    - o *existing activities in the region;*
  - xi. develop training programs for operators, *local guides and communities*, and crew on the biology, behaviour and conservation status of target species, *interpretation of these aspects*, whale watching operation *best practises* and the management provisions in effect;
  - xii. encourage the provision of accurate ~~and informative material~~ information to whale watchers *through various methods (e.g., written materials, lectures, films)*, to:
    - o develop an informed and supportive public;
    - o encourage development of realistic expectations of encounters and avoid disappointment and pressure for increasingly risky behaviour.
  - xiii. *encourage the use of whale watching operations as platforms of opportunity for research.*
  - xiv. develop training programs for whale watch operators, local guides, and crews on how to best respond to cetaceans that are stranded, entangled, injured, or otherwise in distress, in order to ensure;

---

<sup>1</sup> For more information on sustainable wildlife watching please refer to [CMS Resolution 11.29 \(Rev. COP12\) Sustainable Boat-based Marine Wildlife Watching](#)

<sup>2</sup> Wherever 'manage' and 'management' are used, we are referring to adaptive management, which we define as "an iterative process in which practitioners test hypotheses and adjust behavior, decisions, and actions based on experience and actual changes" in the environment and human and animal behavior (see Stankey et al., 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Any vessel (with or without engine), aircraft or person in the water.

- local stranding or entanglement response network organizations are notified about cetaceans in distress or in need of assistance as quickly as possible;
  - appropriate and safe protocols are followed when whale watch vessels remain with stranded cetaceans if responders are available and en route to the scene
  - if no responders are available, appropriate and safe protocols are followed to document the cetacean(s) and related conditions
- xv. that interventions with live cetaceans (e.g., disentanglements) are not conducted while whale watching activities are ongoing (e.g., when members of the public are on the vessel) for the safety of the public and the cetacean

(2) DESIGN, MAINTAIN AND OPERATE PLATFORMS TO MINIMISE THE RISK OF ADVERSE EFFECTS ON CETACEANS, INCLUDING DISTURBANCE FROM VESSEL PROXIMITY OR NOISE:

- i. vessels, engines and other equipment should be designed, maintained, and operated during whale watching to reduce, as far as practicable, the adverse impacts on target species and their environment;
- ii. cetacean species may respond differently to ~~low and high frequency sounds~~ the presence of platforms and the sounds they produce, as well as relative sound intensity or rapid changes in sound; therefore, vessel operators should be aware of;
  - ~~vessel operators should be aware of~~ the acoustic characteristics of the target species and of their vessel under operating conditions; particularly of the need to reduce as far as possible production of potentially disturbing sound;
  - *other potential sources of sound in the environment, such as aircraft, large ships moving through the area, drones, fishing vessels, recreational vessels and jet-skis;*
  - *how targeted individuals may respond to the cumulative sound in the environment;*
  - *the number of other vessels in proximity to the individual being observed, including non-commercial and non-motorised vessels, and the need to keep these numbers as small as possible; and*
  - *the need to reduce a whale watching vessel's contribution to the overall noise and other potential negative impacts in the environment and;*
  - *how quieter platforms such as kayaks, paddleboards, surfboards, etc., are stealthy and can still elicit a startle response or harass cetaceans.*
- iii. vessel design and operation should minimise the risk of injury to cetaceans should contact occur; for example, shrouding of propellers can reduce both noise and risk of injury;
- iv. operators should be able to keep track of whales during an encounter.

(3) ALLOW THE CETACEANS TO CONTROL THE NATURE AND DURATION OF 'INTERACTIONS':

- i. operators should have a sound understanding of *species- and location-specific* behaviour of the cetaceans and be aware of behavioural changes that may indicate disturbance;
- ii. ~~avoid high speed<sup>4</sup> within areas of known cetacean presence;~~ travel at slow speeds, less than 10 knots<sup>5</sup>, in areas of known cetacean presence whenever possible;
- iii. in approaching or accompanying cetaceans, maximum platform speed should be determined relative to that of the cetacean, and should not exceed it once on station<sup>6</sup>;
- iv. use appropriate angles and distances of approach; species may react differently, and most existing guidelines preclude head-on approaches;
- v. ~~friendly whale behaviour should be welcomed but not cultivated~~ do not instigate or encourage direct contact interaction with a platform;
- vi. avoid sudden changes in speed, direction or noise;
- vii. do not alter platform speed or direction to counteract avoidance behaviour by cetaceans;
- viii. do not pursue<sup>7</sup>, head off, or encircle cetaceans or cause groups to separate *or split apart*;
- ix. approaches to mother/calf pairs and solitary calves and juveniles should be undertaken with special care;
  - there may be an increased risk of disturbance to these animals, or risk of injury if vessels are approached by calves;
- x. cetaceans should be able to detect a platform at all times;
  - while quiet operations are desirable, attempts to eliminate all noise may result in cetaceans being startled by a platform that has approached undetected;

<sup>4</sup> High speed' is defined as "travelling at more than 13 knots" (IWC, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> <https://esajournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1890/ES13-00004.1>

<sup>6</sup> Once the platform is actively 'watching' cetaceans.

<sup>7</sup> Chase (as opposed to follow), causing the whale to change its course or speed.

- rough seas may elevate background noise to levels at which vessels are less detectable.

REFERENCES

- International Whaling Commission. 2005. Report of the Scientific Committee. Annex M. Report of the Sub-Committee on Whalewatching. *Journal of Cetacean Research and Management (Supplement)* 7:327-32.
- Stankey, G.H., Clark, R.N. and Bormann, B.T. 2005. Adaptive Management of Natural Resources: Theory, Concepts, and Management Institutions. Gen. Tech. Rep. PNW-GTR-654. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Pacific Northwest Research Station, Portland. 80pp.