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Sub-committees/working group name: WW

Report of the Timor-Leste whale watching ICG

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Report of the Timor-Leste whale watching ICG

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Address the outcomes of the scheduled meeting in 2021 between the Government of Timor-Leste and Committee members and to draft comments on the Timor-Leste draft guidelines for whale watching.

New (Convenor) and Porter (Co-Convenor), Noren, Parsons, Rose, Ritter, Suydam, Urbán

Covid-19 travel restrictions impacted the ability of New and Porter to travel to Timor L'Este as hoped, however, both were invited to attend online meetings of the Assosiasaun Turizmu Maritima Timor-Leste (ATM-TL). ATM-TL was launched in 2019 and its purpose is to provide a multi-stakeholder forum to promote and assist the sustainable development of the marine tourism sector in Timor-Leste. Porter and New attended two online meetings in March 2022, the first focused specifically on the role of the Whale Watching (WW) sub-committee and the IWC and how support might be provided to ATM-TL whale watching company members with regards to developing whale watching guidelines. All four whale watching companies attended this meeting, where it was generally agreed that support from WW would assist the company owners and operators better understand whale watching guideline development. At the second meeting, the ATM-TL formally agreed that any training opportunities that the IWC WW could provide would be most welcome. It was hoped that the travel bans in place in Timor L'Este would enable an in-person meeting in 2022, so that IWC WW, ATM-TL and whale watching operators could better discuss opportunities to collaborate. Travel restrictions were still in place in February 2022, when the next online meeting of the ATM-TL was called. Porter attended this meeting and agreed to keep communication channels open so that when whale watching resumed in Timor L'Este, IWC-WW could still provide support if requested. At this meeting, the new President for ATM-TL was elected (Ivan Samra) who is the owner/operator of Dreamers Dive Academy, Timor L'Este, a marine tourism company that conducts whale watching operations during the whale migration season (October – November).

In October 2022, ATM-TL invited Porter to join whale watching operations in Timor L'Este. Porter met with three of the four whale watching operators (one operator had not resumed whale watching in 2022) and was provided an update on the establishment of whale watching guidelines for Timor L'Este. These guidelines were adapted from existing guidelines for Tonga and adapted with input from all whale watching operators. The guidelines are currently being reviewed by the appropriate government departments and it is anticipated a draft document will be endorsed before the whale watching season begins in 2023. The ATM-TL, and the whale watching operators in particular, remain keen to be engaged with IWC WW. Given the difficulty in communication during the last few years and the reduced capacity of the IWC SC to engage in ICG activities, retaining the existing ICG and fully re-engaging or renewing membership would be appreciated by the Timor L'Este whale watching operators.

One consideration for WW may be that as an overarching observation made by the ATm-TL was that there are no general guidelines for whale watching operators. The IWC whale watching handbook on the IWC website was noted as being too complex and difficult to find basic whale watching operational principles. Perhaps WW could consider developing a simple guide or overarching principles that are more easily accessible and can be more efficiently translated into other languages.

Summary

The outcomes of the 2021 and 2022 meetings have been reported, however, the draft guidelines are not yet available. Could the WW produce over-arching whale watching principle. Request to re-establish the ICG.