

## VOLUNTARY NATIONAL CETACEAN CONSERVATION REPORT

### SUBMITTED TO THE CONSERVATION COMMITTEE BY THE GOVERNMENT OF ARGENTINA

#### 1. Information on whale watching

##### 1.1 *Whale watching operations*

Meanwhile, the State monitors the development of the activity through the presence of permanent auditors in the town of Puerto Pirámides to ensure compliance with the directives, while also, and aiming to continue promoting the high standards of the activity, satellite monitoring equipment was installed in each of the authorized vessels (12 in total) ensuring higher safety conditions and objective control of the whale watching technique in terms of speed, time and distance.

Since the implementation of the Patagonian Whale Watching Technique and the appointment of the tenderers of the bidding process (season 2009), there were increases of 5.3% and 7% compared to the number of passengers boarded in relation to previous seasons. In 2009, 107,103 passengers boarded while in 2010 the number was 114,628. During 2011, the activity decreased by 16% due to factors exogenous to the system, mainly by the presence of a cloud of ash resulting from the eruption of Puyehue volcano in Chile, which resulted in a decrease in the frequency and flight numbers.

#### 2. Current Programs Related to Cetacean Conservation

##### 2.1 *Conservation Management Plan for Southwest Atlantic Southern Right Whales*

A workshop to begin the development of the SWA SRW CMP was held in Buenos Aires, Argentina from 19 – 20 September 2011 and financially supported by the IWC and the government of Argentina. The overall objective of the CMP is to protect southern right whale habitat and minimize anthropogenic threats to maximize the likelihood that southern right whales will recover to healthy levels and recolonise their historical range. A draft proposal on the SWA SRW CMP is submitted by Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay to the 64 IWC (IWC/64/CC7).

##### 2.2 *Research Projects*

###### 2.2.1 POLLUTANTS

Chemical pollutants such as metals and organic compounds could be influencing the high calf mortalities at Península Valdés, Argentina. Metals are commonly present in the environment. They can affect the female and male reproductive systems and can be transferred to the developing fetus. Some effects include reduced intrauterine growth, abortions, malformations and developmental problems. In wild mammals, metals can also disrupt the endocrine and immune systems. However, data on metal levels in live whales and marine mammals is scarce and their health effects on these animals are largely unknown. In 2011, researcher Julieta Martino from Instituto de Conservación de Ballenas collected 40 skin biopsies from southern right whales at Península Valdés to determine trace metal content at the Wise Laboratory of Environmental and Genetic Toxicology at the University of Southern Maine in the United States. A paper to report the results is currently in prep.

###### 2.2.2 AERIAL SURVEYS FOR PHOTOIDENTIFICATION

Aerial surveys of southern right whales off the coast of Península Valdés, Argentina, were conducted by Instituto de Conservación de Ballenas / Whale Conservation Institute on September 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>, 2011. The purpose of the surveys was to document the presence and distribution of southern right whales along the perimeter of the Península by photo-identifying individuals from the callosity patterns on their heads and recording their locations and the presence of calves. A total of 386 southern right whales (including 165 calves) were counted, and 4,000 photographs were taken. Final results of photo-identification analyses are not yet available. Analyses of photographs in the right whale catalog of ICB/WCI are available for the years 1971-2010. Number of individuals photo identified: 2,850.

#### 3. Current threats to Cetacean Conservation and Management Measures Taken/Proposed

##### 3.1. *Bycatch*

The First Workshop for Development of a National Action Plan to reduce the by-catch of Marine mammals was hosted by Secretaría de Ambiente y Desarrollo Sustentable, and Subsecretaría de Pesca y Acuicultura from 27 – 29 September 2011. The workshop was financed by the Federal Fisheries Council. National and provincial governmental agencies, scientific and academic sector, non governmental organizations attended the meeting.

A diagnosis of the legal and institutional framework, of status and trends of marine mammals and by catch was presented by Scientist and other stakeholders. Besides, some proposal of mitigation measures have been presented.

During the workshop, the attendees worked in two groups ( By catch and mitigation), they discussed the actions to be developed and they identified the institutions with competence on that issues.

Actually there`s a draft version of the plan and it is expected to be finished and approved during this year.

### **3.2. Disentanglement**

The first organized disentanglement response in Argentina took place in the bay of Puerto Piramides in September 2002 when a juvenile male Southern Right Whale became tangled in the mooring of a large Whale Watching catamaran. Since then, the number of entangled whales has increased in the area, especially between 2009 and 2011 (SC/64/BC1)

The Direccion de Fauna and Flora Silvestre of Chubut (DFyFS) performs various actions related to cetacean conservation through Chubut`s Marine wildlife Network (which abbreviation in Spanish is RFCC)

By means of the Disposition # 75/2010, the DFyFS made the Marine Wildlife Network become official. This regulation establishes the different cells along Chubut`s coast and appoints the coordinators of each cell.

Puerto Madryn and Peninsula Valdes cells have all the necessary human and material resources to perform marine wildlife rescues, especially those involving cetacean, which is the reason why a Stranding and Disentanglement Program was created within Chubut`s Marine Wildlife Network

The events involving entangled cetacean and the response to each event were registered on file for further analysis and reported in “Entanglement of Southern Right Whales (*Eubalaena australis*) in Gulf Nuevo, Chubut, Argentina” (SC/64/BC1).

Last year, the IWC agreed to develop a training workshop to improve the response to entanglement of whales in Argentina. This workshop was held by the Chubut province from 27 to 29 March 2012 in Puerto Madryn and Puerto Pirámides. The workshop was supported by the IWC and the government of Argentina.

Sixty-four participants from national, provincial and municipal institutions, NGOs, students, tourism guides, veterinarian, divers and WW Captains attended the first daylong seminar, conducted on land at the Ecocentro in Puerto Madryn. This seminar provided extensive background on what is currently known about the topic as well as theoretical training on the safe release of whales from entangling rope and net.

The second day consisted of practical training on the water in the harbor of Puerto Pirámides. The participation in this training was limited to 10 individuals selected by the DFyFS as those who were most likely to be involved in rescue response in Chubut. These included members of the Argentine Coast Guards, SIPA rescue group of Puerto Madryn Coast Guards, staff from the DFyFS, the Provincial Fisheries Agency, Direction of Conservation and Protected Areas, Whale Watching Captains Association, a doctor and diver specialized in rescue and local stranding and rescue network, some of whom have had experience in several previous rescues in Chubut. The training on the water consisted of using special tools and techniques developed by the existing international networks, especially those in Australia, Canada, South Africa and the U.S. The custom built tools used during the training were given to DFyFS for use in any upcoming entanglement responses in Chubut.

This activity helped us strengthen the Cetacean Stranding and Disentanglement Program, and provided DFyFS with tools and knowledge to better organize the response to upcoming entanglement events in Chubut.

### **Training**

An additional training workshop by David Mattila during the whale`s season (June-November) with the purpose of evaluate the behavior of the Southern Right whales in our area and share experiences will be request.

### **Further activities**

After the Workshop DFyFS have continued working and scheduled various activities related to entanglement response and prevention, among which are the following:

#### *Constitution of the rescue teams*

DFyFS have planned to perform more practical training on the water to provide training to other cells of the Marine Wildlife Network. Practical training on the water has been scheduled for the cells of Peninsula Valdes, Puerto Madryn and Rawson/Playa Union in order to constitute entanglement response teams in the cells of the regions with potential entanglement risks covering all the coast of the Province of Chubut.

### *Protocols*

The Cetacean Stranding and Disentanglement Program of RFCC is actually drawing up a disentanglement protocol, and the list of people qualified to respond to cetacean rescues that will be made official by the DFyFS as the regulatory authority of the network.

### *Risk map*

DFyFS are actually mapping the potential risks of entanglement, ship collisions and oil spills according to the main activities that take place in the provincial coastal areas (oil companies, moorings, mussel farming, fishing zones, areas with heavy ship transit, etc).

### *Prevention*

Meetings have been scheduled with the Nautical Associations to assess and minimize the risk of entanglements by improving the mooring of sailing boats. DFyFS have also scheduled educational and diffusion activities for 2012.

### *Tools*

The tools donated to the DFyFS will be replicated to supply at least 3 cells of the Network

## **3.3 Strandings**

### **3.3.1 TRAINING WORKSHOP**

A training workshop on response to stranding cetacean was hosted by the Dirección de Fauna of the Province of Río Negro, the Police Department of Río Negro and Fundación Cethus on the 23 April 2012 in Viedma, Río Negro. 140 participants from 11 institutions (Policía de Río Negro, Prefectura Naval Argentina, Dirección de Fauna Silvestre de Río Negro, Secretaría de Ambiente de Río Negro, Colegio de Veterinarios de Río Negro, Ministerio de Turismo de Río Negro, Dirección Municipal de Turismo de Viedma, Cuerpo de Bomberos de Río Negro, Municipalidad de San Antonio, Universidad Nacional del Comahue and Universidad Nacional de Río Negro) attended the workshop. Other activities are planned to strength the capacity building on stranding in the province of Río Negro.

### **3.3.2 THE SOUTHERN RIGHT WHALE HEALTH MONITORING PROGRAM (SRWHMP)**

The Southern Right Whale Health Monitoring Program (SRWHMP) at Península Valdés, Chubut, Argentina began in 2003 with support from the US National Marine Fisheries Service. The program is a collaboration between local NGOs, research centers, and governmental agencies. At present, the Program operates as a collaboration of the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), Whale Conservation Institute/Ocean Alliance (WCI/OA), Instituto de Conservación de Ballenas (ICB) and Fundación Patagonia Natural (FPN) with funds from the member organizations and donations from private foundations and the US Marine Mammal Commission.

A Contact Network (CN) has been essential to the success of the SRWHMP. Over the years, the CN has reported 330 of 489 beached animals, while 78 were found during aerial surveys and 81 during land-based surveys by members of the Program's field team. Members of the CN include: park rangers, fishermen, local people, whale watching companies, diving companies, tourism companies, nature guides, sailors, airplane pilots, artisanal fishermen, researchers, NGOs, and local authorities such as the Argentine Navy and the Argentine Coastguard. In addition to reports from the CN, the SRWHMP surveys the beaches in both gulfs in regions where the whales concentrate using its own vehicle.

In some years, aerial surveys have been provided by the Administración del Área Natural Protegida Península Valdés. Aerial surveys by the Administración were first carried out in 2006 but since then the number of flights has varied each season. In 2009 only two flights were carried out in contrast to 5 in 2008. In 2010-2011 aerial surveys were funded by the Wildlife Conservation Society and the *Fondo para la Conservación Ambiental del Banco Galicia*. With the exception of the annual photo-id surveys conducted at the time of peak whale abundance (September) by the Whale Conservation Institute / Instituto de Conservación de Ballenas, aerial and land survey efforts have not been consistent since 2003 and have been difficult to maintain throughout each season.

During 2011 the Southern Right Whale Health Monitoring Program (SRWHMP) recorded and collected samples from a total of 61 stranded whales at Península Valdés, including three juveniles and 58 calves (95%). We conducted post-mortem examinations on the stranded whales and when conditions permitted, we collected hundreds of samples from each dead whale, which will be analyzed for infectious diseases, biotoxins, contaminants, nutritional status, diet, genetics, and other potential factors contributing to mortality.

While ash from the eruption of Puyehue volcano in Chile curtailed our plans to conduct a larger number of aerial surveys in 2011, we were still able to fly along the entire perimeter of the Peninsula 7 times from July through December, which exceeded flight frequency and number from past years. By increasing flights we were able to detect 43% (26) of right

whale carcasses stranded in inaccessible areas. In addition, our efforts to expand the network that reports dead whales were very successful, as 46% (28) of carcasses were found due to volunteer reports.

One humpback whale died in Golfo Nuevo off Puerto Madryn. Researchers from the SRWHMP helped with logistics to release the carcass from the piles of the city's pier, and basic samples were collected by provincial authorities.

### **3.4 Gull attacks on right whales.**

Kelp gulls at Península Valdés feed on the skin and blubber of live southern right whales and cause the whales to flee the attacks or maintain body postures that keep their backs underwater. Calves have to learn this avoidance behavior. Researchers from the Instituto de Conservación de Ballenas (ICB) and the Whale Conservation Institute / Ocean Alliance (WCI/OA) have recorded the frequency of the attacks at different sites of the Península annually since 1995 as a way to gauge the success of efforts to curb these attacks. This is the longest database in the world on this parasitic behavior. In September of 2011, they observed 104 mother/calf pairs during 1,098 5-min intervals in 22 observation days. They recorded 1,092 gull attacks, of which 72% were aimed at the calves and the remaining 28% were aimed at the mothers. The gulls attacked the whales in 23% of the 5-minute intervals recorded in Golfo San José and in 39% of the intervals recorded in Golfo Nuevo. The frequency recorded in Golfo Nuevo showed an alarming increase in gull attacks in 2011.

At both sites, gull attack frequency was 12% in 1995 and had doubled to around 24% in Golfo Nuevo by 2007-2010 and 23% in Golfo San José. Gulls aim the vast majority of their attacks at newborn calves, which raises concerns about the impact that this parasitic behavior has on the health and welfare of this highly sensitive age class. Monitoring and controlling the gull harassment problem has become a joint project with other NGOs and local government officials of Chubut Province.

In May 2012 a team consisting of policy makers and technicians from three provincial government agencies (Ministry of Production, Ministry of Tourism and Protected Areas, Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development Control) action resumed and reached consensus with researchers, representatives of municipalities, NGOs and whale watching operators the implementation of an action plan for intervention in the gull-whale interaction. Through its implementation is to run a series of measures to minimize the problems in the area of the Peninsula Valdes, in relation to the aforementioned interaction. The main components of the action plan will be: strategic communication about the interaction between both species, the development of a pilot study to remove kelp gulls with technical assistance from the Centro Nacional Patagónico (CONICET), the eradication of open dumps, the continued monitoring of population trends of both species and monitoring the rate of gull-whale interaction.

## **4. Cooperation Programs**

In April 2010 during the I meeting of the Commission on Technical and Scientific Cooperation between Argentina and Panama, both countries agreed to develop a two years cooperation program to work on capacity building and training workshops on whale watching for tour operators, fishermen and scientist from Panama. The Fondo Argentino de Cooperación Horizontal (FO AR) in collaboration with the Autoridad Panameña de Turismo (ATP) developed a whale watching capacity building workshop in Bocas del Toro, Panama in September 2011 to train whale watching operators and to reduce the impact on a resident population of Bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*). A second part of this program will be developed in the second half of 2012.