

SC/66b/E/11

Chair's Summary of IWC Workshop to
develop practical guidance for the handling
of cetacean stranding events. 5-6 May,
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INTERNATIONAL
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IWC Workshop to develop practical guidance for the handling of cetacean stranding events

Chair's Executive Summary for SC66b

The Workshop was held in Kruger National Park, South Africa from 5-6 May 2016. There were 34 participants from 13 different countries. Participants included individuals from a wide range of stakeholders including national authorities from IWC member countries; veterinarians and veterinary pathologists; strandings biologists; animal welfare specialists; biologists and academics working on aspects of cetacean welfare; and experts from animal welfare organisations. This included participants who are actively involved in strandings response and animal rescue efforts. This workshop was held back to back with the Workshop to Support the Consideration of Non-Hunting Threats to Cetacean Welfare, which took place from 3-4 May.

The primary objective of the workshop was to assist the IWC in its efforts to build global capacity for effective cetacean stranding response and promote the IWC as a leading body for the provision of advice through the development of practical guidance for responders. It aimed to assist the IWC in taking forward relevant actions in the IWC Welfare Action plan, particularly Objective 2.4. *To work through existing strandings networks to produce specific recommendations to the Commission in relation to the welfare implications of responding to cetacean stranding events* and Action 2.4.1 *To organise a mass strandings workshop to progress the development of shared best practice and guidance in responding to such events.*

The workshop was informed by existing efforts to build strandings response capacity including the outputs of a Workshop organized by the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution (WHOI), International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA's) National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) 'To Develop An International Marine Mammal Stranding and Entanglement Response Toolkit', held in June 2014, and by the joint IWC/Society for Marine Mammalogy Workshop 'Investigations of Large Mortality Events, Mass Strandings, and International Stranding Response' which took place in December 2015. In addition, the workshop received a series of case studies and presentations illustrating examples of national strandings response, identifying existing strandings guidance and protocols and exploring the challenges faced by countries in developing an effective strandings response. These included submissions relating to Argentina, Spain, the Republic of Ireland, Netherlands, New Zealand, South Africa, Scotland, UK and USA.

The workshop considered in some detail aspects of the strandings response relating to i) prevention of strandings (for example, through herding and acoustic measures); ii) live strandings response (veterinary assessment, refloat/rescue, relocation/release, rehabilitation and euthanasia); iii) post-release monitoring; iv) mass stranding considerations; v) health and safety; vi) handling of public and the media and cultural considerations; vii) post-mortem investigation and tissue sampling and viii) carcass disposal. The workshop used a case study (stranding of a fin whale in Baltimore Harbour, Cork, Republic of Ireland) to explore the welfare aspects of strandings in relation to key decisions facing strandings responders.

Finally, the workshop discussed the potential role of the IWC in further developing guidelines and protocols for strandings and in acting as a repository for the identification and dissemination of best practice.

Draft conclusions and recommendations

The workshop noted the challenges faced by some countries in responding to cetacean strandings in the absence of resources (human capacity, suitable equipment and financial support) and clear national protocols, guidelines and responsibilities. It agreed that there was a clear role for the IWC in assisting with these national efforts. The IWC should not interfere with national sovereignty but should help set a framework and provide best practice guidelines for countries to use in adaption to their national circumstances.

The workshop **recommended** that the IWC establish a framework to provide advice to contracting governments on critical elements to include in the establishment of a national strandings response network. It also **recommended** that the IWC promote capacity building by acting as a repository for the dissemination of best practice on strandings response, including national strandings response strategies, appropriate training materials, and euthanasia.

The workshop **recommended** that example case studies from around the world be pulled together, with information on successes and failures, to help illustrate best practice in responding to stranding events, and that these be hosted on the IWC webpage.

The workshop **welcomed** the progress made towards development of the Global Marine Animal Stranding Training tool kit (GMAST) and recognised that this is a well progressed initiative, for which the first phase will be concluded in the coming months. It thus **agreed** that the work of the IWC should seek to build on and utilise rather than duplicate this existing effort. As a result, the workshop **recommended** that the IWC Scientific Committee actively engage in the phase 2 development of the GMAST by facilitating a meeting of relevant experts and providing advice to the Commission on its use within the IWC.

The workshop **emphasised** the importance of data collection and information gathering from strandings as vital to the understanding of the health and welfare of marine mammal populations and their environment. It can also (especially if associated with post-release monitoring) feed back directly to inform and improve strandings response. It further **agreed** that even the most basic observation and data can be useful, and that a level of data collection can be conducted by volunteers and in the absence of sophisticated facilities and technology. It noted the importance of data sharing between strandings networks and countries and the potential for the IWC to assist in this regard, including through the development of a global strandings data portal. It noted the efforts of other organisations in developing protocols and guidelines for information gathering and necropsy.

As a result of these discussions the workshop **recommended** that the IWC Scientific Committee consider the need to develop a global strandings data portal. The workshop **noted** the continued good progress in developing standardized necropsy protocols/guidelines and **recommended** continued coordination between the IWC and other organisations including ASCOBANS/ACCOBAMS, the European Cetacean Society and other relevant regional processes, in order to promote consistent data collection on the causes of strandings and potential welfare issues.

The workshop noted the high levels of public interest in strandings events reported by countries and social media and the importance of actively engaging the public and media including to safeguard public safety and to minimise stress and suffering of the animal. It emphasised the value of clearly briefing the media on decisions that are made and that this can help engender public acceptance in difficult circumstances (for example where euthanasia would be ideal but is not feasible). The workshop **recommended** that IWC Parties establish clear and effective strategies for media handling and promote proactive engagement with the media and public during high profile stranding events.

The workshop **noted** that there were potentially significant health and safety issues involved in responding to stranded cetaceans. These included risk of wounding (for example from unexpected movements of large animals) and the transfer of zoonotic disease. Where appropriate, those involved in strandings response should abide by their national health and safety legislation. The workshop **recommended** that rescue attempts should ideally be undertaken by appropriately trained individuals. In addition, those involved in rescues are **encouraged** to give careful consideration to appropriate insurance coverage.

The workshop further discussed potential threats to public safety during stranding events (e.g. from inappropriate public behaviour and from handling of dead carcasses). It discussed the need for a balanced approach to ensuring public safety, whilst recognising public interest and limitations in resources available (e.g. for policing of sites). The workshop **recommended** that, drawing on existing material, the Secretariat create a document to be hosted on the IWC website that provides basic advice to the general public on health, safety, and animal welfare during live stranding events and during the handling of dead cetaceans.

The workshop **emphasised** that additional resources would be required to fulfil the role of the IWC as the lead body facilitating the dissemination of strandings advice and for capacity building. The workshop **recommended** that the IWC give consideration to the establishment of a dedicated funding stream to help improve cetacean stranding response globally. The workshop further **recommended** that the Secretariat provide cost estimates for taking forward the relevant actions in the IWC Welfare Action Plan and the recommendations of this workshop.