

Update from the United Kingdom on follow up to IWC workshop “Euthanasia Protocols to Optimize Welfare Concerns for Stranded Cetaceans”

Submitted by the United Kingdom in September 2016 for discussion under Agenda Item 3 of the WG WKMWI Agenda on 20 October 2016.

Response to live strandings in the UK

Live stranding response, which includes euthanasia for welfare reasons as one potential outcome, is largely performed on a voluntary basis in the UK. A number of organisations work under the aegis of the Marine Animal Rescue Coalition (MARC) in the guidance and provision of live stranding response, including but not limited to: British Divers Marine Life Rescue (BDMLR); the Royal and the Scottish Societies for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA and SSPCA); the Cetacean Research and Rescue Unit (CRRU); the Cetacean Strandings investigation Programme (CSIP); Humane Society International; and Whale and Dolphin Conservation.

Follow up to the recommendations resulting from the 2013 IWC workshop

The UK is grateful for the opportunity to provide an update on steps undertaken to follow up on the recommendations made by the euthanasia Workshop held in London in 2013. Many recommendations already formed guiding principles of practice and response within the UK rescue community. Where this isn't the case, relevant recommendations are being assessed and integrated into protocols where appropriate

Information on the UK's position in relation to each of the sixteen recommendations made by the workshop is detailed below.

Recommendations of the IWC Workshop on “Euthanasia Protocols to Optimize Welfare Concerns for Stranded Cetaceans”.

- 1 *The workshop stresses that human safety should always be considered paramount.*

This has been a general guiding principle in euthanasia of live stranded cetaceans, since the inception of live stranded response in the UK.

- 2 *The workshop recommended that the humaneness should be the first criteria for any euthanasia method, rather than concerns over aesthetics or public acceptance, although also important in the bigger picture when managing euthanasia. A humane death will often involve the very shortest time to death, but not always if pre-sedation is undertaken to provide anxiolysis and analgesia (AVMA 2013). Other criteria for the chosen method of euthanasia include availability of equipment and drugs, existing knowledge/expertise, and relevant legal/regulatory framework (including cultural, political, aboriginal, socioeconomic differences between countries).*

Euthanasia for welfare reasons, through use of the most humane options, has been a general guiding principle of live stranded response in the UK.

- 3 *The workshop recommended several chemical and physical techniques for euthanasia of large beached whales, including chemical sedation followed by potassium chloride (KCl) intra-cardiac injection for baleen whales (Harms et al 2014) and high calibre ballistics and explosives (cranial implosion technique) (Coughran et al 2012) for baleen and sperm whales.*

The UK Government (Defra) funded the purchase of three intra-cardiac injection kits in 2014/15, that have been deployed around the UK to be trialed and assessed by the Cetacean Strandings Investigation Programme (CSIP). However, the relevant pre-euthanasia sedatives used in the USA (midazolam, acepromazine and xylazine) are available in a less concentrated form in the UK, thus

significantly increasing their costs at the required dosage. This may ultimately preclude the effective use of the intra-cardiac method in the UK.

Discussions with the UK Ministry of Defence and Royal Navy have taken place, with respect to potential provision of assistance with use of specialized ballistics and/or explosives (cranial implosion method) for euthanasia of large live stranded cetaceans. Any use of the latter would be subject to a derogation being made to existing EU legislation, which prohibits the use of explosives to euthanise European Protected Species.

- 4 *The workshop strongly recommends that euthanasia of cetaceans should not be conducted by untrained personnel, as this may endanger humans and increase the suffering of the animals.*

Euthanasia of live stranded cetaceans is only carried out in the UK under the authority of experienced personnel.

- 5 *The workshop recommended that in order to ensure the safety of response personnel, attempts at euthanasia of beached whales should not be conducted when a whale is in surf and should be conducted only when a whale has been stabilized or is above the tide line.*

This has been a general guiding principle in euthanasia of live stranded cetaceans, since the inception of live stranded response in the UK.

- 6 *All euthanasia methods should be tested on dead animals first, to develop methodological expertise and obtain correct anatomical knowledge (e.g. via necropsies on strandings).*

The intra-cardiac injection kits (see point 3) are being trialed by the CSIP on dead stranded large cetaceans where logistically appropriate and possible. Discussion has also taken place surrounding trials of the cranial implosion method on heads of dead stranded large cetaceans, although this has not yet been possible to progress this further.

- 7 *The workshop recommended that for chemical methods, removal of the injection site to limit risk of disposal and potential for relay toxicity is a minimum requirement. Where barbiturates have been used, the entire carcass should be disposed of where scavengers cannot access it.*

Small to medium sized cetaceans that have been chemically euthanized are routinely recovered from stranding locations for post-mortem examination and subsequent appropriate disposal. Injection sites in larger euthanized cetaceans have also been removed for later disposal where appropriate.

- 8 *The workshop recommends that IWC member nations refine existing or develop new incident response protocols based on the principles and guidelines found in this report.*

Many recommendations of the report were already being used within the UK rescue community. Other recommendations are being assessed and integrated into protocols where appropriate (see preceding points).

- 9 *The Workshop recommends, for each event, the collection of appropriate data, full documentation of the event and the sharing of experiences/data to refine decisions and situation handling in the future. This process should include information on both successes and failures; the latter can be extremely informative in developing improvements and preventing mistakes being repeated.*

Information on live stranding responses (including euthanasia) are regularly shared, discussed and assessed within the UK Marine Animal Rescue Coalition (MARC), including information on any failures. Data on UK cases of euthanasia of live stranded cetaceans have been collated and reported back to the IWC for the last two years within national reporting through the Action Plan on Whale Killing Methods.

- 10 *The workshop recommends the addition of a number of 'outcome' fields to the existing IWC*

National Progress report database for live strandings: released/rescued; euthanized (method categories as in Table 3); no intervention.

Nothing to update on this item.

- 11 *The Workshop noted the value of establishing a voluntary group of experts (contact list) that can be consulted by the IWC and others to: (1) provide advice on euthanasia protocols and methods to relevant authorities; (2) provide objective information to the media if requested and (3) assist the IWC Secretariat in populating the IWC website. The Workshop recommends that this list be maintained by the IWC Secretariat.*

The UK already publicises relevant points of contact for cases of both live and dead strandings. This information has been shared with the IWC Secretariat.

- 12 *The Workshop noted the great potential of the IWC to facilitate work on live strandings and euthanasia techniques, similar to the approach developed for disentanglement (IWC, 2013). It therefore recommends the establishment of a live stranding response component of the IWC website with a layered capacity. It also encourages IWC countries to facilitate the exchange of information, expertise, technology and training.*

Members of the UK Marine Animal Rescue Coalition are routinely involved in outreach, education and training at both regional and national levels.

- 13 *With respect to data gaps, the workshop agrees that more work is needed on the environmental persistence and potential effects of some chemical methods and encourages this research and provision of information. The Workshop notes the importance of composting as a safe and environmentally positive means of disposal of cetacean carcasses and it encourages national and local authorities to facilitate this method of disposal where appropriate.*

The UK is unable to provide an update on this at present, but will continue to consider how improvements could be made to environmentally positive means of cetacean carcass disposal.

- 14 *The Workshop recognised the effectiveness of penthrate grenades and encourages the development of a darting-gun type delivery system that is suitable for beached animals and may also be appropriate for entangled whales at sea. It requests that a progress report on this topic is provided to the 2014 Annual Meeting of the IWC.*

Not applicable to the UK.

- 15 *Related to this, the Workshop endorses a previous Workshop recommendation (IWC, 2012) concerning the need to develop methods for euthanasia of cetaceans at sea (entangled or otherwise requiring human intervention). It agrees that this may be facilitated by the holding of a future technical Workshop and requests that this be considered further at the 2014 Annual Meeting.*

Nothing to update regarding euthanasia of cetaceans at sea.

- 16 *At several places in this report, the Workshop highlighted difficulties with mass stranding events. It therefore recommends that the IWC consider holding or facilitating the holding of a future Workshop on mass stranding events, including management, social, welfare and euthanasia considerations.*

Several UK experts contributed presentations at the IWC convened workshop held at the Conference of the Society Marine of Mammology in 2015, held in San Francisco.