INTERNATIONAL
WHALING COMMISSION

**IWC Website Guidance and Proposals to
Facilitate Communication amongst Commission Members¹**

Prepared by the Secretariat

Introduction: Working Group on Website Guidance

A Working Group was established by the Bureau in March 2015 to provide general principles and practical guidance on use of the IWC website. The Terms of Reference for the Working Group (Annex A) also ask the Working Group to consider in the context of the website's evolution and the IWC's commitment to increase transparency and understanding, how the website might be used to facilitate communication amongst Commission members.

Section One: The IWC Website

Background

In common with many other organisations, the IWC's website has evolved and expanded since it was established in 1996. Today, websites play a central role in almost any kind of communications plan. They are a particularly valuable and cost-effective means of reaching audiences in more than one country, and provide organisations with an almost unlimited public space in which to explain issues without first passing through the filter of another medium (print/broadcast/online journalism). Today, the IWC website contains over 500 specially created pages and 8,000 documents. It handles up to 10,000 views per day and has attracted visitors from 235 countries. It is our most important communications tool.

Audience

Our audience analysis is relatively basic, relying on free-to-use analytic services, but from this we are still able to gather certain useful and reasonably reliable pieces of information:

In the year Jan 2015 – Jan 2016:

- More than 60% of users visited the site just once.
- The average number of different pages visited in one browsing session was 5.
- The average time spent on a single page was 49 seconds.
- Aside from the Home Page, the pages most frequently visited were the Population Estimates, Status of Whales and Commercial Whaling pages, although there were no 'runaway favourites' and the selection of pages visited was consistently widespread.
- The nationality of visitors most frequently visiting the site (as recorded by IP address and therefore not including pages passing through online translation services) were unsurprisingly predominantly English speaking: United States followed by Australia, United Kingdom, Canada and Japan.

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¹ This paper was previously discussed by the Bureau at the June 2016 Meeting (BUR J16 04)

Whilst recognising its limitations, this information on our audience and its behaviour has helped us refine the structure of the website, and is now helping us to prioritise updates.

Structure

To date, the overriding principle governing what is posted on the IWC website by the Secretariat is that all contents must report factually and neutrally, the business of the Commission.

This is broken down into three levels of content. The first of these is an introductory level. This text is written primarily for the large audience who are not familiar with the work of the IWC and do not visit the site regularly or spend long on any single page. It aims to explain often complex issues simply and concisely and, as far as possible, avoid technical language and acronyms. Throughout the site, text is supported by photographs, maps and other images that help to 'tell the story' and enhance the presentation of the site. These images are particularly important on the introductory pages.

A second, 'intermediate' level of content is incorporated into some sections. This aims to meet the demand from some users for more detailed, but not 'expert' information. Depending on the amount of additional information deemed necessary or appropriate, this may be incorporated as additional 'click here' panels of text on the introductory pages, as separate pages, or sometimes (for particularly complex issues) a combination of both.

Finally, the third level of content relates to source material: workshop reports, principles and guidelines documents, meeting documents etc. Our analytics service isn't able to tell us exactly who uses this information but it seems sensible to assume that this material is important to our core internal audience of IWC member governments, scientists and observers. We know from correspondence that content is also regularly used by a wider field of practitioners, academics and students. The new archive section of the website is an increasingly important tool. It is gradually incorporating more documents and recordings to build a comprehensive and freely accessible library of IWC source material.

Resources

The development and updating of website content is the responsibility of the Secretariat Communications Officer and approximately one third of this role is currently allotted to website-related tasks. The Secretariat IT Officer offers support on technical issues. Aside from the proportion of salary, there is currently no budget allocated to website content development. Images are sourced on a free-to-reproduce basis, and, as explained above, the Secretariat makes use of a free analytics service.

Content Management

As outlined above, to date, content has been governed by the principle that the website must report factually and neutrally, the business of the Commission. Text is sourced and based as closely as is practical on the language used by the Commission, and produced in recognition that this language is often carefully crafted and the product of lengthy negotiation.

Before publication, draft material is checked by the Secretary and/or Head of Science as appropriate, and often also by others outside the Secretariat leading on particular work strands.

New Website Guidelines

Whilst broad agreement exists[2] that the new website guidelines should allow the Secretariat, in consultation as appropriate, to continue to make decisions on web content, the TORs of the Working Group make clear that the guidance should distinguish between work that has been specifically endorsed by the Commission, and work that has not. (Current examples of topics on the website that have not been specifically endorsed by the Commission are Small Type Coastal Whaling, the South Atlantic Sanctuary, the Future of the IWC, and the Revised Management Scheme).

Recommendation

The Secretariat requests that the Working Group consider and adopt the draft Website Guidance document at Annex B.

Section 2: Facilitating Communication across Commission Members

To assist the Working Group, the Secretariat has looked at how comparable organisations use their websites to facilitate communication within their respective memberships.

A number of organisations have chosen to operate website forums or portals. For example:

CCAMLR operates a series of e-groups to 'foster improved collaboration amongst intersessional working groups.'

CITES operates online discussion forums 'in order to facilitate informal discussions and exchange information among Parties.'

CMS operates an e-community 'to provide factual background on CMS and support National Focal Points in fulfilling different aspects of their roles.'

Eligibility to join these groups varies. Some are open to any interested individual, some are vetted by their organisation's Secretariat, some are open to nominated government representatives and some are restricted to invited participants.

Whilst no two systems appear to operate in exactly the same way, the majority of those looked at were described as informal and almost all were established in order to focus on a single, specific issue.

The IWC is already in the process of establishing two online forums that will adhere to these principles. Restricted access intranet sites have been established for the Cetacean Disease group and the Entanglement group. These are sub-sites to the main IWC web site. Each aims to enable members to share information and discuss issues as a group and in real-time. The IWC also operates listserve e-mail distribution lists for a large number of different working groups. These allow members of the group to e-mail all members of the group simultaneously.

There may be benefits in developing these tools further and making greater use of technology, particularly now that the biennial meeting cycle has created longer intersessional periods, and the number of working groups has increased.

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[2] See Minutes of Bureau Meeting Sept 2015, Item 6.2.1

Within existing resources, the Secretariat could create similar members-only access intranet sites for other working groups.

A more sophisticated option is to integrate the information sharing/library features of the members-only intranet sites with the ease of communication provided by a listserve. This option could be attractive to busy working group members as it would store relevant documents, reports and correspondence in one place, from which it can be easily accessed and shared. It could also hold the Terms of Reference for the group, and images if appropriate. Although it could not be achieved instantly, the Secretariat IT Department could build this kind of tool with relatively small additional software costs.

Finally, there is merit in considering whether such a tool might also assist Commissioners in engaging with the IWC, particularly during the intersessional period. At present, the only agreed IWC mechanisms for circulating information across the Commission are in person at the Commission Meeting, or via a public Circular. Commissioners are of course able to communicate directly with each other, but a restricted access intranet forum could offer a useful, additional option. Membership could be limited to Commissioners only, or could include accredited observers, or could vary depending on the preferences of the relevant member Government on a particular issue. This would allow some non-public discussions, and perhaps create a new mechanism for gathering views or testing draft proposals.

Creating a site for Commissioners would be a relatively complex exercise and would require additional resources. This is because the security requirements would be higher than those for issue-based forums, and a site perceived to be 'high-level' could be a new and appealing target for hackers. Whilst non-public discussions are clearly essential to any organisation, creating a restricted forum for Commissioners may cause concern amongst stakeholder bodies.

Recommendation

In the context of resources and best practice across some comparable inter-governmental organisations, the Secretariat recommends that the Working Group adopt an incremental approach to facilitate communication amongst Commission members, testing the value of each stage as outlined below:

Short term (Winter 2016):

The existing IWC intranet forum framework is offered and promoted to all working groups and to kick-start a programme of web-based discussion and information exchange.

An e-mail listserve is established for Commissioners. This will help gauge the appetite for more sophisticated online information-sharing tools amongst Commissioners.

Medium term (intersessional period 2016-18):

The Secretariat IT Department develops an integrated information sharing/e-mail distribution tool to be piloted by one of the working groups and, assuming it's useful for members, offered to other working groups.

Longer term: (post IWC67-2018)

If feedback from Commissioners and Working Groups is positive, resources are allocated to develop a separate, restricted intranet site for Commission-members, integrating the existing e-mail distribution listserve with a secure information sharing/discussion site.

ANNEX A

TERMS OF REFERENCE

INTERSESSIONAL WORKING GROUP ON IWC WEBSITE CONTENT

In their teleconference of 26 March 2015, the IWC Bureau agreed to 'form a working group, supported by the Secretariat, to collect ideas for assembling initial guidance on the use of the IWC website.' The guidance will be presented, via the F&A Committee, to the Commission in 2016.

To achieve this the group shall:

- Present to IWC66 a document that provides general principles on use of the IWC website, and practical guidance as appropriate. In developing the guidance the group should:

1) Draw a distinction between work that has been passed by a Resolution of the Commission and proposals or initiatives that have not received this endorsement.

2) Consider the evolution of the IWC website and how it might be used to increase transparency and improve public understanding of issues under discussion at the IWC.

3) Consider how the website might be used to facilitate communication amongst Commission members.

- Liaise with the Operational Effectiveness Group to ensure they are aware of this work.

Members: all Bureau members: Bruno Mainini (Switzerland, IWC Chair), Joji Morishita (Japan, IWC Vice Chair), Ryan Wulff (USA, F&A Committee Chair), Deb Callister (Australia), Jeanne Compton-Antoine (St Lucia), Benson Nutsukpui (Ghana), Andrej Bibic (Slovenia), Carols Rodriquez (Uruguay); and from the IWC Secretariat, Simon Brockington (Executive Secretary) and Kate Wilson (Communications Officer).

ANNEX B

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GUIDANCE ON THE USE OF THE IWC WEBSITE

General Principles

The objective of the IWC website is to improve public understanding and increase transparency of the work of the IWC.

It does this by recording factually and neutrally, the business of the Commission.

The website should cater for different audiences by dividing content into three levels: introductory, intermediate and practitioner.

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

Practical Guidance

The Secretariat is responsible for maintaining, developing and updating the IWC website in line with the principles above.

Members of the Commission are invited to provide or suggest content, all of which will be edited by the Secretariat to ensure coherence of style and format across the site as a whole.

Work that has been clearly endorsed by the Commission should be recorded on the website in as timely a fashion as resources allow.

Work that has not received this endorsement should be considered on a case-by-case basis, and referred by the Secretariat to the IWC Chair and/or Vice Chair.