
Voluntary National Cetacean Conservation Report

Submitted to the Conservation Committee by the Government of Australia

This report provides an update on cetacean conservation actions undertaken by Australia since IWC65.

1. WHALE AND DOLPHIN PROTECTION PLAN (2014-2017)

To ensure the management of cetaceans continues to reflect best practice and is based on current scientific evidence, the Australian Government is implementing the Whale and Dolphin Protection Plan. This plan provides resources for Australian local and state governments and the scientific community to undertake work that will help manage and protect cetaceans.

Activities funded under the plan include:

- Research examining the conservation status, ongoing management and understanding of dolphins in Australian waters.
- Research to identify potential management interventions to prevent and manage whale and dolphin entanglements with fishing gear.
- Provision of training aids to improve the management of cetacean stranding events.
- Training for state and territory government employees to safely and effectively respond to strandings and entanglements.
- Enhancement of whale viewing platforms and interpretive material to support community education and whale watching tourism opportunities.

2. INFORMATION ON WHALEWATCHING OPERATIONS

The Australian Government's *Australian National Guidelines for Whale and Dolphin Watching 2005* are based on Australia's whale watching regulations. Australian states and territories responsible for the conservation and protection of whales and dolphins in coastal waters outside of the Australian Whale Sanctuary (up to 3 nautical miles from the coast), have based their own guidelines and regulations on the national guidelines.

2.1 REVIEW OF WHALE WATCHING MANAGEMENT

The Australian Government is finalising a review into how whale watching is managed in Commonwealth waters. Following completion of a *Review of Scientific Literature Describing the Impacts of Whale and Dolphin Watching*, a stakeholder workshop (May 2016) and targeted consultation with state government agencies, draft revised whale and dolphin watching guidelines were released for public comment on 12 September 2016. Comments close on 21 October 2016 and finalisation of the revised guidelines is expected to occur in early 2017.

Proposed changes to the guidelines include:

- Information on how the regulations apply to the operation of drones within the vicinity of a cetacean;
- Additional advice on the management of dolphin watching operations in areas where there are a large number of recreational and commercial vessels and dolphin populations are isolated; and
- Additional advice on swim-with cetacean programs, which are growing in popularity.

3. CURRENT AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT PROGRAMMES RELATED TO CETACEAN CONSERVATION

Australian Government agencies in Australia participate in a range of programmes at state, national and international levels to facilitate cetacean conservation as outlined below.

3.1 NATIONAL INITIATIVES

- Whale Watching – including a review of whale and dolphin watching management, which is underway, as noted above.
- Recovery and Conservation Management Planning – there are five cetacean species listed as threatened under Australia's national environmental legislation – *the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act). The Australian Government has developed national Conservation Management Plans for the Southern Right whale and the Blue whale. In addition, Conservation Advice, which identifies threats and management actions for listed species, has been published for Humpback, Fin and Sei whales.
- Improving management of stranded and entangled whales – using funding provided by the Australian Government under the Whale and Dolphin Protection Plan, state and territory governments have developed and implemented nationally accredited training courses for operational personnel that respond to cetacean strandings and entanglements.
- Assessing the level of risk posed by vessel collisions to cetaceans – building on a project that assessed the risk of large vessels colliding with humpback whales in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, a project is underway that will examine the risk of vessel collision with whales and other marine fauna in all waters off Australia's mainland.

In addition, the Australian Government continues to conduct regular consultation forums to ensure national policies are based on operational understanding and practicality. These forums include:

- Government Cetacean Management Workshop – This is an annual forum attended by all relevant states and territories which allows for the timely identification of cross-jurisdictional cetacean issues, the sharing of management experience, and review and comment on emerging cetacean policy issues (both in Australia and overseas).
- Cetaceans Non-Government Organisation (NGO) Roundtable – the Australian Government holds roundtable forums on cetacean matters with NGOs twice a year. This helps to ensure that issues of concern to civil society on cetacean policy and management at both national and international levels, are identified, discussed and as appropriate, addressed by the Government.

3.2 RESEARCH PROJECTS

The Australian Government's Australian Marine Mammal Centre (AMMC) is based in Hobart, Tasmania. The Centre leads on providing scientific research and advice to inform and support Australia's marine mammal conservation priorities. The AMMC hosts the National Marine Mammal Data Portal. This portal collates and protects data that facilitates data-driven management and conservation decisions, as well as assisting with reporting obligations to the IWC. The AMMC also leads Australia's scientific commitment to the Commission's Southern Ocean Research Partnership (IWC-SORP). This is an integrated, collaborative consortium for non-lethal whale research, which aims to maximise conservation outcomes for Southern Ocean whales through an understanding of the post-exploitation status, health, dynamics and environmental linkages of their populations, and the threats they face. The IWC-SORP has developed six multi-national research programs on whales in the Southern Ocean that address key IWC research needs. Australia provides in-kind support to the IWC-SORP through hosting the Secretariat, and has been actively involved in all six research programs.

The Australian Government's National Environmental Science Program (NESP) funds biodiversity and climate science to assist decision makers understand, manage and conserve Australia's environment. This has included funding two projects in 2015-16 which focus on cetacean conservation and management:

- Quantification of risk from shipping to large marine fauna across Australia
- Monitoring population dynamics of 'western' right whales off southern Australia.

4. MANAGEMENT MEASURES TO ADDRESS CURRENT THREATS TO CETACEAN CONSERVATION

4.1 MARINE NOISE AND SEISMIC SURVEYS

The Australian Government continues to implement and promote a set of requirements aimed at minimising the impacts of seismic activities undertaken for oil and gas exploration. Under the EPBC Act, policy statement 2.1 "Interaction between Offshore Seismic Exploration and Whales" (September 2008) provides practical standards to minimise the risk of acoustic injury to whales in the vicinity of seismic survey operations, and provides guidance on the legal responsibilities of proponents undertaking the activities. (<http://www.environment.gov.au/epbc/publications/seismic.html>).

The Australian Government's National Offshore Petroleum Safety and Environmental Management Authority (NOPSEMA) is the sole regulator of all offshore petroleum facilities in Commonwealth waters, and in coastal waters where state powers have been conferred. NOPSEMA is a Commonwealth Statutory Agency.

4.2 STRANDINGS

Australia has an excellent response capacity to assist individuals and groups of whales in distress, in cases where assistance is physically and logistically possible. Australian Government agencies at all levels have worked together over many years to establish strong communications and operations networks to manage and respond to events such as whale and dolphin strandings. As part of this communication network, we are able to share information on unusual stranding events such as the cluster of Risso's dolphin strandings in late 2014 and early 2015 and a higher than usual number of *Kogia* strandings in 2016.

4.3 SHIP STRIKES

The Australian Government is developing a National Vessel Strike Strategy aimed at mitigating vessel-cetacean (and other marine mega-fauna) interactions. The strategy objectives include:

- Data collection to understand the scale of the problem in Australian waters.
- Data analysis involving a risk assessment and analysis of existing databases.
- Development of reporting procedures which are more assessable and efficient.
- Development of mitigation measures.
- Engagement with industry using a partnership approach towards information gathering and mitigation.

The AMMC has developed a national ship strike database and an associated web-based questionnaire, based closely on the IWC data collection questionnaire. This will ensure that the data collected in Australia is compatible with the IWC ship strike database. Attempts to submit data from Australian waters directly to the IWC will be redirected back to the AMMC-based portal to ensure all reporting has national verification.

It is expected that the draft strategy will be made available for public comment in October 2016.

5. REPORTING SYSTEMS FOR CETACEAN INJURIES/MORTALITY/STRANDINGS

Australia utilises a number of reporting systems to identify events resulting in cetacean injuries or mortality. Some of the reporting systems are established under EPBC Act legislative requirements, for example fisheries by-catch reporting. There is also surveillance provided by Coastwatch – a coordinating maritime response service – for a range of Australian Government agencies. Their duties include identifying and responding to illegal fishing in Australian

waters, detecting and reporting environmental incidents such as marine pollution and unusual marine mammal mortality events for many remote areas of Commonwealth water.

5.1 INCIDENT REPORTING – STATE/COMMONWEALTH COOPERATION

Cetacean injuries, strandings and mortality in Australia are generally reported to local and state government agencies as most incidents are observed in coastal waters (up to 3nm from shore). A National Whale and Dolphin Sightings and Strandings Database is currently being redeveloped to record this information.

A close, cooperative working relationship exists between Australia's state, territory and Federal government agencies responsible for cetacean conservation, and incident prevention, response and outcomes are managed at a number of levels.

6. INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION ACTIVITIES

The Australian Government is party to a number of multilateral agreements related to whales, in addition to our engagement in the IWC and its programs (such as IWC-SORP). These include the *Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species* and the *Convention on Migratory Species*.