

Gabon Voluntary National Cetacean Conservation Report, 2016

**Submitted by the Government of Gabon to the Conservation Committee
66th Meeting of the International Whaling Commission
October 2016**

The coastline of Gabon extends approximately 900 km from Equatorial Guinea (1°N) to the Republic of the Congo (4°S). Its marine waters are home to a healthy diversity of cetaceans including globally important seasonal aggregations of humpback whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) and resident Atlantic humpback dolphins (*Sousa teuszii*). At least 24 cetacean species have been recorded although several of these considered rare (see Appendix 1) and limited to whaling records. Many populations are poorly known given limited research and significant effort is being made to improve data availability from offshore areas.

1. Legal and other developments

Several laws and decrees defining the regulation of Gabon's coastal and extended marine protected areas have been drafted and should shortly be voted on by the Gabonese Parliament. The following is based on these documents.

1.1) Fully protected species

Wild animals living within Gabonese territory are classified into three categories: fully protected species (Appendix I), partially protected species (Appendix II) and unprotected species (Appendix III). In 2011, the humpback whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) was added to Gabon's list of 40 fully protected animal species, as amended by Decree No. 0164/PR/MEF of 19 January 2011 on the classification and the number of animal species that may be killed. The humpback whale is currently the only cetacean species on Appendix I. However, a revision of these appendices was drafted in 2015. If agreed - the revised Appendix I would include all great whales (Balaenidae, Balaenopteridae, Neobalaenidae, Physeteridae) as well as all beaked whales (Ziphiidae) that might occur and the Atlantic humpback dolphin (*Sousa teuszii*) greatly threatened across its range. A revised Appendix II would include all remaining Delphinidae species known to occur in Gabonese waters.

The hunting, capture, captivity, commercial use or transport of fully protected species is prohibited (Article 3, Decree No. 0164 PR/MEF). According to Article 275 of the Forestry Code, offences linked to fully protected species are punished with three to six months of imprisonment and a 100,000 to 10 million CFA francs fine (or either of these two penalties). Exceptionally, the Water and Forestry Administration can authorise the take of fully protected species for scientific purposes or if an animal puts people or property at risk.

1.2) Marine protected areas

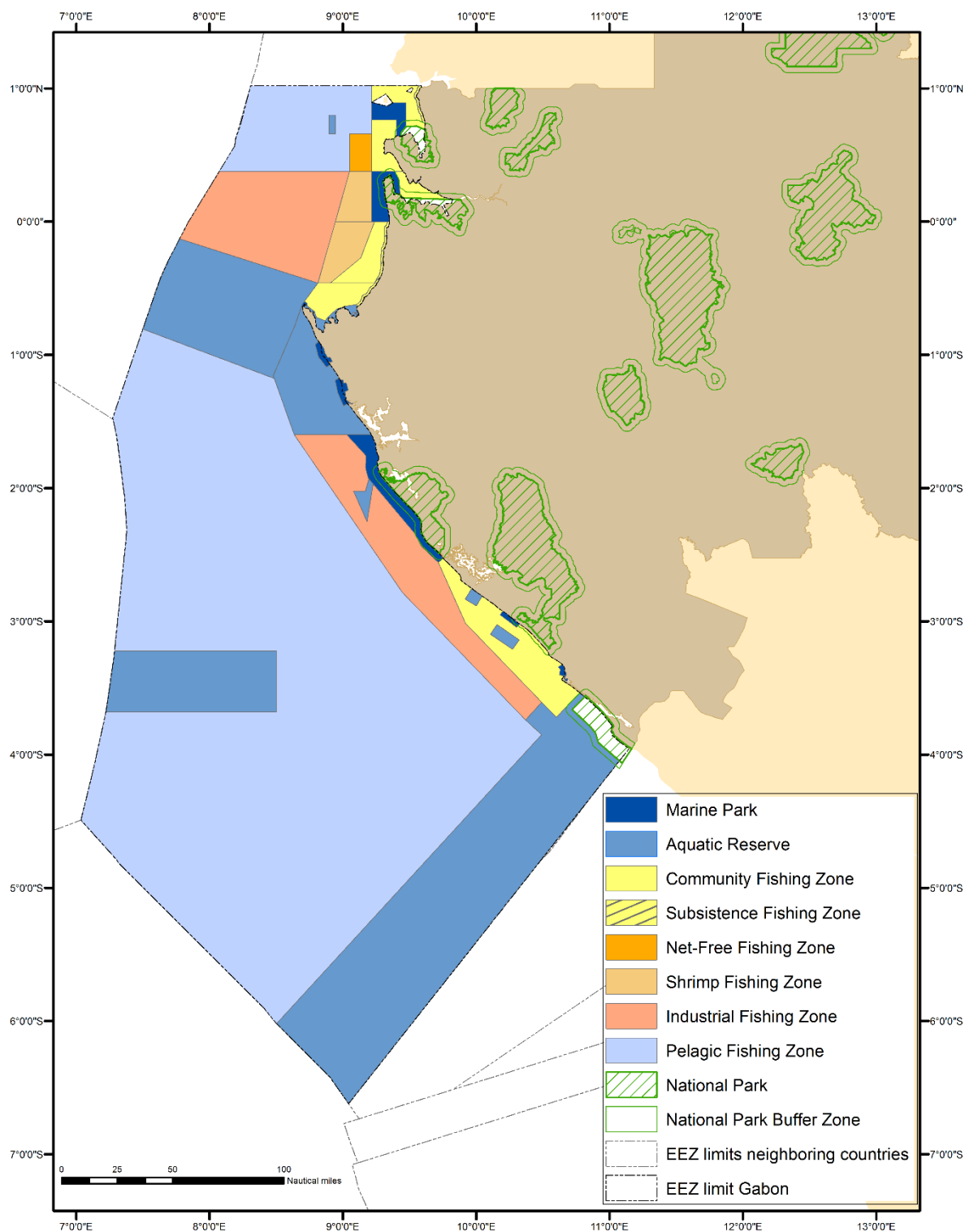
Article VII of the Forestry Code enshrines specific provisions for marine and coastal ecosystems. Under the latest 2016 draft of the Water and Forestry Code:

1. Every marine and coastal ecosystem should have a management plan, developed in cooperation with all relevant stakeholders (Section 1, Article 452).
2. Any work or activity which is likely to alter the initial ecological state of a marine or coastal ecosystem is banned. However, a few exceptions, such as the construction and development of a port area or operations to protect marine or coastal areas, are authorised (Section 1, Article 453).
3. Any work or activity in a marine or coastal area is subject to a preliminary social and environmental impact report involving collaboration between the relevant government agencies and any other stakeholder (Section 1, Article 454).
4. The procedures for the establishment or disestablishment of a sensitive marine or coastal area are prescribed by the Forestry Code (Section 2, Article 458).
5. The Water and Forestry Administration works together with other government agencies to recover and rehabilitate endangered aquatic species (Section 2, Article 461).

In Gabon, there are currently four marine protected areas (Akanda, Pongara, Loango and Mayumba). At the 2014 IUCN World Parks Congress, President Ali Bongo Ondimba of Gabon announced a decision to create a new marine protected area network of ten marine parks covering more than 18,000 square miles (over 46,000 square kilometres) that will safeguard habitats for whales, sea turtles, and other marine species inhabiting the nation's coastal and offshore waters. The MPA network would encompass approximately 23 % of Gabon's territorial waters and Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The creation of the marine protected area network is one of the main objectives of *Gabon Bleu* (see section 2.1). Scientific research within Gabon's EEZ facilitated a robust marine spatial planning exercise (using MARXAN) and led to the identification and delimitation of these marine protected areas.

PROPOSED MANAGEMENT ZONES in the EXCLUSIVE ECONOMIC ZONE OF GABON

October 2016



1.3) IUCN, CITES and CMS

Details of species included on IUCN, CITES and CMS appendices that also occur in Gabonese waters is provided in Annex 1. Gabon became a contracting party to CITES in 1989 and became a signatory to the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) in 2008. Gabon signed the CMS Memorandum of Understanding Concerning the Conservation of the Manatee and Small Cetaceans of Western Africa and Macaronesia in 2008.

2. Current Government programmes related to cetacean conservation

2.1) National Initiatives

Gabon Bleu

Gabon Bleu is a Presidential marine conservation initiative aimed at the sustainable management of Gabon's coastal and oceanic waters and the creation of a comprehensive marine protected area network. Additionally, the Gabon Bleu initiative aims to reinforce the management of the country's industrial and artisanal fisheries, the offshore oil and gas industry, and maritime security. Gabon Bleu's accomplishments include:

1. The creation of a new National Agency for Fisheries and Aquaculture (ANPA)
2. The establishment of a National Ocean Council (CNM)
3. New legislation, both proposed and ratified, to create fishing zones and better apply existing fisheries law.
4. Comprehensive marine zoning for sustainable management of marine resources
5. Increased national capacity for control and management
6. Two national observer programmes: one working with industrial fisheries to record information on catch and bycatch on tuna, shrimp, and trawler boats; the other to record marine mammal observations on board seismic vessels. These data are being analysed alongside declarations made by the companies to the government, to better characterize activity in several sectors.
7. The informal artisanal fishery sector is being broadly transformed with a new system for fishing licenses, boat registers and monitoring. Artisanal communities have undergone a due diligence consultation process about creation of marine management zones. Management plans for these zones are currently being prepared.

Gabon Bleu works in collaboration with local and international NGOs including the Wildlife Conservation Society and World Wide Fund for Nature (see section 2.2).

Observer Programme for Monitoring Industrial Fishing

An observer programme for monitoring industrial fishing was established in 2011 by the Gabonese government. Its main aim is to collect data on marine resources and to promote the sustainable management of the country's marine resources as well as fight against illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing. The program was remodelled in 2014. Since then, its main objective is to develop the expertise of 30 permanent observers in collaboration with the Wildlife Conservation Society.

Satellite-assisted environmental monitoring programme (SEAS GABON)

Since 2005, all fishing vessels operating within Gabon's EEZ have to possess a positioning and tracking device on board for remote surveillance purposes. The satellite-assisted environmental monitoring programme began in 2011, based on a strategic partnership between Gabon (AGEOS), France (AFD, IRD) and Brazil (INPE), and became operational in 2015. Maritime surveillance through SEAS GABON allows for the identification of illegal fishing, the detection of pollution and helps regulate vessel presence within the Gabon's EEZ.

2.2) Cooperation with Non-Governmental Organizations

WCS Ocean Giants Programme

The WCS Ocean Giants programme has been a proactive partner in Gabonese marine mammal research initiatives since 2001. A principal focus has been humpback whales, including the provision of data relevant to the IWC Comprehensive Assessment of Southern Hemisphere Humpback whales. These include abundance estimates for whales in IWC stock B1, genetic data that clarify the affinities of Gabonese whales to other stocks in the Southern Hemisphere, - and satellite tagging data that revealed movements of whales into the Gulf of Guinea and south into the Southern Ocean. More recent work has included surveys in the region of Port Gentil as part of an assessment of ship strike risk focused research on Atlantic humpback dolphins (including neighbouring Congo) and collation of bycatch and strandings data. Work on humpback dolphins has received substantial funding from the IWC Voluntary Fund for Small Cetaceans and data collected through the project have been presented to the IWC Scientific Committee. A new programme of work is in development and may include surveys in offshore regions.

WCS 'Congo Basin Coast' (CBC) programme

Key objectives of this programme include the conservation of key coastal habitats, the species that use them and the mitigation of major threats. This programme has contributed substantially to *Gabon Bleu* and is currently focused on projects that support national marine management objectives.

A major outcome of both WCS programmes has included the training of national park staff as well as other national stakeholders. This is an essential element of national the conservation efforts as ultimately they will be responsible for both the management of protected areas as well as generating primary data on species, habitats and threats in the future.

World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF)

In 2011, WWF started a marine programme in Gabon. In collaboration with the Gabonese Government and other conservation NGOs (IUCN, WCS and the Smithsonian Institution), WWF collects data on coastal cetaceans, identifies potential threats and participates in the creation and implementation of MPAs and management plans. WWF also works with *Gabon Bleu* and the Department of the Environment to

define guidelines for offshore oil exploration and production. Further details available at: [http://www.wwf-congobasin.org/where we work/gabon/marine programme/](http://www.wwf-congobasin.org/where_we_work/gabon/marine_programme/)

Sea Shepherd Global - 2016

Operation Albacore was a pioneering collaboration, launched in April 2016, between Sea Shepherd Global and the Gabonese Government. The aim of this five-month campaign was to tackle illegal, unregulated and unreported (IUU) fishing. The operation revealed extensive bycatch of sharks and whales. Sea Shepherd also recorded all sightings of cetaceans including melon-headed whales, significant numbers of Bryde's whales and humpback whales (see Appendix II). The crew also freed a Bryde's whale caught in purse seine of an EU tuna boat.



2.3) Research

Cetacean surveys in Gabon have been conducted from five different field sites: Pongara (2012), Port Gentil (2000, 2012, 2014), Iguéla (2001-2005), Gamba (2000 and 2002) and Mayumba (2005-2011). Surveys have also been conducted in partnership with other agencies (including a cooperative COMHAFAT survey in 2011 and the EAF-Nansen project in 2014). Research has included, *inter alia*: surveys to assess humpback whale seasonal population density, relative and total population abundance and population dynamics; satellite tagging to ascertain humpback whale

movement patterns and habitat use; behavioural studies of humpback whales and humpback dolphins; and the collection of tissue samples from free swimming cetaceans and strandings - for genetic research.

3. Current threats to cetacean conservation and management measures taken/proposed

In Gabon and the wider Gulf of Guinea region a variety of threats are known and include entanglement in fishing nets, ship strikes, and habitat loss. Data are scant given limited research and the threat of each of these is believed to be significant. Concerns include the development of regional ports, shipping and offshore industrial activity over the past decade, a process likely to continue for many years. The expansion of oil and gas exploration and production in the offshore waters of Gabon, which is of primary importance in the country's economy, very likely has significant and negative effects on offshore cetacean species. Gabon has implemented strict measures to limit the negative effects of seismic surveys as part of an expanded effort to mitigate their environmental impacts. There is however scope for improvement in other areas.

3.1) Fisheries interactions

Overfishing and illegal fishing causes the depletion of stocks and ecosystem damage. Bycatch is a significant cause of mortality for cetacean species in Gabonese waters. Most fishing gear is not designed to limit captures and there is substantial evidence of dolphin and whale captures in coastal gillnets, trawls and purse seines. In a 2015 fisheries observer report, 49 dolphins were reported captured on monitored vessels, and initial extrapolations suggest that at least 113 dolphins may have been captured across the Gabonese industrial fleet. These are likely a minimum estimate given incomplete monitoring coverage and the fact that a number of captures are likely to have been hidden from the observers by crew members. During the 2016 tuna season, bycatch reported from five seiners from the European Union included two humpback whales (which were released), several hundred sharks and a dozen or so turtles. The Observers on board also reported 222 cetacean sightings including 10 humpback whales, 87 Bryde's whales (see Appendix II) and other undetermined whales and dolphins.



3.2) Hydrocarbon Exploration and Exploitation

Data from Gabon are limited.

“Rig to reef”

In 2014, Perenco Oil and Gas and ANPN signed a three-year agreement to conduct studies on the abundance of the marine life surrounding oil rigs, and to protect these ecosystems during production and decommissioning phases. The agreement stems from studies conducted by the ANPN, the National Geographic Society, the Waitt Institute and the Wildlife Conservation Society. Further information is available from ANPN.

3.3) Acoustic and noise pollution

Data from Gabon are limited.

3.4) Collision with ships

Collisions with ships are presently unknown in Gabonese waters but are known from the wider region. They are assumed to occur in Gabonese waters and current research efforts include assessment of ship strike risk in waters adjacent to Port Gentil.

4. Whale Watching Management and Relevant Actions Under the 5-Year Strategic Plan for Whale Watching (IWC/63/CC 3)

Gabon is a fantastic location for whale tourism (and wildlife tourism in general). During the breeding season (July to October), humpback whales aggregate close to the coast. As part of its sustainable development goals, Gabon envisages increasing and diversifying eco-tourism. WCS collaborated with the General Directorate of Fisheries and Aquaculture (DGPA) and Gabon’s National Parks Agency (ANPN) to produce both whale watching guidelines for operators and a guide for tourists who wish to go on Gabonese whale watching trips. Whale watching operators remain poorly managed in Gabon; there is no official process for registering and policing whale watching vessels. However, guidelines based on internationally accepted standards (including those of the IWC), have been distributed. Whilst compliance remains patchy, general improvements in behaviour have been noted. Some areas, particularly Port Gentil, still require significant whale watching management effort. Copies of Gabonese whale watching guidelines are available from ANPN or WCS.

5. Reporting systems for cetacean injuries/mortality/strandings

There is no national strandings response or monitoring programme in Gabon. Stranded or dead marine mammals are typically reported by national park ecoguards (rangers), researchers (including those focusing on nesting turtles) or incidentally by tourists and other observers. Reporting is generally *ad hoc* although within national parks events can be logged within an ANPN database and are otherwise reported to the relevant Provincial Directorate of Fisheries and Aquaculture. Reports are occasionally produced. WCS has maintained a database of coastal marine mammal strandings and

mortalities since 2002 and records include a suite of species, including the first confirmed record of Cuvier's beaked whale and several mass strandings of dolphins (typically common and spotted dolphins).

The *Observer Programme for Industrial Fishing Monitoring* publishes a report annually that provides summary statistics for fishing bycatch/mortality. The estimated capture of 113 dolphins was reported in 2015.

6. International cooperation activities

6.1) University of Exeter (UK) Darwin Initiative Project: Marine Biodiversity Action Plan for Gabon (2009-2012)

Gabon has significant natural resources and while substantial efforts have focused on terrestrial conservation, the country's marine biodiversity has been under-researched. The main aim of the Exeter University project was to provide a national Marine Biodiversity Action Plan (MBAP) for Gabon integrating all available information on the spatial distribution of biodiversity and threats. The project was funded by the UK Darwin Initiative (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) which assists countries that are rich in biodiversity but lack sufficient financial resources to meet their objectives to international biodiversity conventions. A Marine Biodiversity Atlas for Gabon was published at the end of the project in 2012 (see Appendix III).

6.2) National Geographic's Pristine Seas project (2012) and Gabon's marine protected area network

Pristine Seas is an exploration, research, and media project to find, survey, and help protect the last wild places in the ocean. Further information available at <http://ocean.nationalgeographic.com/ocean/explore/pristine-seas/gabon/>

Appendix 1 – List of marine mammals known to occur off Gabon, 2016

Family	Scientific name	English name	IUCN Red List	CITES	CMS
<i>Balaenopteridae</i>	<i>Balaenoptera musculus</i>	Blue Whale	EN	I	I
<i>Balaenopteridae</i>	<i>Balaenoptera physalus</i>	Fin Whale	EN	I	I
<i>Balaenopteridae</i>	<i>Balaenoptera borealis</i> *	Sei Whale	EN	I	I
<i>Physeteridae</i>	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>	Sperm Whale	VU	I	I
<i>Delphinidae</i>	<i>Sousa teuszii</i>	Atlantic Humpback Dolphin	VU	I	I
<i>Balaenopteridae</i>	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>	Humpback Whale	LC	I	I
<i>Balaenidae</i>	<i>Eubalaena australis</i>	Southern Right Whale	LC	I	I
<i>Ziphiidae</i>	<i>Ziphius cavirostris</i>	Cuviers beaked whale	LC	II	I

<i>Delphinidae</i>	<i>Peponocephala electra</i>	Melon headed whale	LC	II	-
<i>Delphinidae</i>	<i>Steno bredanensis</i>	Rough toothed dolphin	LC	II	-
<i>Delphinidae</i>	<i>Grampus griseus</i>	Rissos Dolphin	LC	II	II
<i>Delphinidae</i>	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>	Bottlenose dolphin	LC	II	II
<i>Delphinidae</i>	<i>Stenella attenuata</i>	Pantropical spotted dolphin	LC	II	II
<i>Delphinidae</i>	<i>Stenella coeruleoalba</i>	Striped dolphin	LC	II	II
<i>Delphinidae</i>	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>	Common dolphin	LC	II	I
<i>Delphinidae</i>	<i>Lagenodelphis hosei</i>	Frasers dolphin	LC	II	II
<i>Balaenopteridae</i>	<i>Balaenoptera edeni</i>	Bryde's Whale	DD	I	II
<i>Physeteridae</i>	<i>Kogia sima</i>	Dwarf Sperm Whale	DD	II	
<i>Delphinidae</i>	<i>Orcinus orca</i>	Killer Whale	DD	II	II
<i>Delphinidae</i>	<i>Globicephala macrorhynchus</i>	Short-finned Pilot Whale	DD	II	-
<i>Delphinidae</i>	<i>Pseudorca crassidens</i>	False Killer Whale	DD	II	-
<i>Delphinidae</i>	<i>Stenella frontalis</i>	Atlantic Spotted Dolphin	DD	II	-
<i>Delphinidae</i>	<i>Stenella longirostris</i>	Spinner Dolphin	DD	II	II
<i>Delphinidae</i>	<i>Stenella clymene</i>	Clymene Dolphin	DD	II	II

Appendix 2 - Historic Sei/Bryde's whale catches compared to 2016 Bryde's whale sightings

Red Dots
Brydes/Sei Catches listed in the IWC Catch Database
Sorted by Month across all seasons and companies

Green Dots
Brydes/Balaenoptera sightings reported by Sea Shepherd 2016

C. Allison. IWC individual catch database
Version 5.5; Date: 12 February 2013

There are no reported catches in this region for January and February

