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**Voluntary National Cetacean Conservation Report**

**Submitted to the Conservation Committee  
by the Government of Australia**

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**This report provides an update on cetacean conservation actions  
undertaken by Australia since IWC66.**

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

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

Activities that were 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. NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR REDUCING VESSEL STRIKE ON CETACEANS AND OTHER MARINE MEGAFUNA**

In 2017 the Australian Government published *The National Strategy for Reducing Vessel Strike on Cetaceans and other Marine Megafauna 2017*. This document provides guidance on how to measure and reduce the risk of vessel collisions and the impacts they may have on marine megafauna, including cetaceans. The development of this strategy included targeted stakeholder engagement in 2015, which included relevant state and territory government agencies, the Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA) and Non- Government Organisations, including International Fund for Animal Welfare and Humane Society International. Following this public comments were sought in early 2017 before the document was finalised.

**3. MANAGEMENT OF WHALEWATCHING OPERATIONS**

*Australian National Guidelines for Whale and Dolphin Watching 2017*

Following a comprehensive review The Australian Government published the *Australian National Guidelines for Whale and Dolphin Watching 2017*.

These Guidelines were developed in consultation with the state and territory governments, scientists, industry representatives and non-government organisations. They provide a consistent national policy for the management of whale and dolphin watching in Australian waters. They build upon and replace the *Australian National Guidelines for Whale and Dolphin Watching 2005*.

The guidelines provide advice for all governments in the development, updating and implementation of laws regulating whale and dolphin watching.

#### Workshop to review the management of swim-with whale activities

In early 2018 the Australian Government hosted a workshop to discuss the management of swim-with whale activities. The objective of the workshop was to facilitate consistent management of this increasingly popular activity across all jurisdictions in Australia through:

- The identification of appropriate management measures that can be implemented through permits and licenses issued by each jurisdiction;
- The identification of knowledge gaps that should be filled to improve management; and
- The formation of a network that can be expanded and used to share experiences and information to improve management.

Workshop participants included swim-with whale operators and state and Commonwealth government officers responsible for cetacean management, research and policy development.

## **4. CURRENT AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT PROGRAMMES RELATED TO CETACEAN CONSERVATION**

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

### *4.1 NATIONAL INITIATIVES*

- Whale Watching – including the finalisation of the revised *National Guidelines for Whale and Dolphin Watching 2017* and a review of swim-with whale activities 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. The conservation status of the humpback whale is currently under review due to a strong recovery of subpopulations D and E1, which migrate along Australia’s west and east coasts.

- 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 research project will shortly be completed that examines the risk of vessel collision with humpback, sperm and southern right whales 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 roundtables 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 addressed by the Government, as appropriate.

#### *4.2 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 themes 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 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 four projects in 2017 and 2018 which focus on cetacean conservation and management:

- Estimation of population abundance and mixing of ‘Southern’ Right Whales in the Australian and New Zealand regions

- Monitoring the population dynamics of the south-west population of Right Whales.
- Quantification of risk from shipping to large marine fauna across Australia
- Characterising anthropogenic underwater noise to improve understanding and management of acoustic impacts to marine wildlife

## **5. MANAGEMENT MEASURES TO ADDRESS CURRENT THREATS TO CETACEAN CONSERVATION**

### *5.1 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.

### *5.2 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.

### *5.3 SHIP STRIKES*

As described above the Australian Government published *The National Strategy for Reducing Vessel Strike on Cetaceans and other Marine Megafauna 2017*. The strategy objectives include:

- Data acquisition to address information and knowledge gaps.
- Data analysis involving a risk assessment and analysis of existing databases.
- Mitigation to reduce the likelihood and severity of vessel collisions.
- Communication to support the achievement the three previous objectives.

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.

## **6. 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.

### *6.1 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.

## **7. 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*.