

Annex R

Report of the Whale Watching Subcommittee

1. INTRODUCTORY ITEMS

Participants: Suydam (Chair), Urbán (co-Chair), Aguilar, Aranha, Atkinson, Babey, Barros, Campbell, Cassani, Charlton, Chauca, Cisternino, Collier, de Groes, di Tullio, Evangelista, Fernandez, Freitas, Fyfe, Gallego, Germishuizen, Han, Hielscher, Holm, Iñíguez, Jimenez, Katara, Kelly, Leal, Li, Luna, Lysenko, Marmontel, Mbengue, Miketa, Minton, Nelson, New, Noren, Palazzo, Parsons, Passadore, Pinder, Porter, Ritter, Robson, Rose, Rojas-Bracho, Ryeng, Seakamela, Seyboth, Simmonds, Stachowitsch, Staniland, Tandy, Trejos, Trujillo, Viloria, Webster, Weinrich, Wang, Wilson, Zerbini.

1.1 Opening remarks

Suydam welcomed the subcommittee to SC69B. He noted that the structure of the Scientific Committee meetings in the future would be changing to a biennial schedule. Thus, the Whale Watching Subcommittee (WW) will only meet in person every other year. The subcommittee needs to consider how to focus and prioritise its work stream and discussions, given this longer intersessional period. See Item 7 for additional discussion about the future of the subcommittee.

1.2 Election of Chair and Co-Chair

Suydam and Urbán were elected Chair and Co-Chair.

1.3 Appointment of rapporteurs

Rose was appointed rapporteur.

1.4 Adoption of agenda

The adopted agenda is given as Appendix 1.

1.5 Review of available documents

SC/69B/WW/01, SC/69B/WW/04–07

2. ASSESS THE IMPACTS OF WHALE WATCHING AND SWIM-WITH-WHALE OPERATIONS ON CETACEANS

2.1 Studies on assessing impacts: (1) short term; (2) mid- to long-term; (3) swim-with operations; (4) emerging issues of concern; and (5) emerging technology

SC/69B/WW/07 reported on tourism involving river dolphins (*Inia spp.*) in the Amazon, including tourists feeding and swimming with dolphins from submerged platforms. These activities have been ongoing since 1998, particularly in the Anavilhanas National Park, where there is considerable regulatory control over the activity. However, the activity has rapidly expanded (regulation has not kept pace), particularly in the state of Amazonas, with various tourist ventures making online offers for this type of activity and advertising the activity in hotels and resorts in the region. Recently, this activity has been documented for the first time with *Inia araguaiaensis* (an endangered population endemic to the Brazilian Araguaia-Tocantins Basin, which has been called to the attention of scientific institutions and researchers as a probable new species) in the Tocantins River, state of Pará. Although in some circumstances dolphin feeding and swim-with tourism could be seen as a sustainable and profitable activity for local populations, the situation in Pará poses serious risks to both the animals and tourists. The feeding sites have a large amount of boat traffic, as well as a significant amount of

litter and waste in the water. The fish offered are of low quality and would not be suitable for human consumption.

Some of the dolphins conditioned to feeding have injuries, scars and amputations. There is evidence of mistreatment and abuse of the animals, as well as serious risks of zoonotic disease transmission and dolphins biting tourists, both of which have already been documented in other locations around the world where dolphin feeding activity occurs. It is necessary to assess the impact of this type of activity on the dolphins, as this population's vital parameters and abundance are not yet fully known. Monitoring and regulating the activity are urgently required.

The subcommittee thanked the authors for reporting on this situation. In discussion, it was noted that Brazil is trying to regulate this activity and a resolution to protect dolphins has been passed in the state of Amazonas, but this protection should be expanded beyond the state's borders. There are at least five feeding operations in the Brazilian Amazon that are not following any rules. It was further suggested that any effort to regulate feeding operations should be for all of the Amazon River, not just Brazil. It was noted that in some Amazon River locations where there is feeding of free-ranging *Inia*, dolphins had been captured and had their teeth pulled to protect tourists from being bitten.

Systematic data on dolphin population dynamics and impacts from feeding are available from some areas in the Amazon, but not Pará. Efforts to conduct research are ongoing. Further discussion noted the possible similarities between the impacts of feeding river dolphins in the Amazon and feeding bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*) in Monkey Mia and Bunbury, Australia (e.g. Foroughirad and Mann, 2013; Senigaglia *et al.*, 2019). At a minimum, provisioning females with calves should not occur; it is already prohibited, but this prohibition is not being enforced.

Attention: CG, SC, R

A challenging situation has developed in Pará, Brazil, where tourism operators are selling opportunities to feed and interact with free-ranging Inia (an endangered population endemic to the Brazilian Araguaia-Tocantins Basin, which has been called to the attention of scientific institutions and researchers as a probable new species) from shallow water platforms at riverside locations. The provisioned fish is frequently of low quality and both dolphins and humans are at risk of injury and illness, including zoonotic transmission of disease in both directions. Even though this recent activity is occurring locally, and with the use of a separate species, this is a problem that also extends to Inia geoffrensis. There is a local prohibition on feeding female dolphins with calves in Amazonas state, but there is no enforcement, and additional national regulation - including controlling the quality of fish fed to the dolphins - is needed to protect these animals, which have been seen with mouth lesions and damaged jaws.

If this activity is pursued with adequate protection for the dolphins and tourists, it has the potential to benefit local communities and dolphin conservation, providing income to the tourism sector and thus a financial incentive to protect the dolphins. Without regulation or guidelines and their enforcement, feeding these dolphins, where at times one dolphin is surrounded by many tourists, is unsustainable.

*The subcommittee therefore **recommended** that:*

- 1. The Government of Brazil and local authorities reach out to stakeholders, including local tourism operators, to develop and implement guidelines for this activity, to ensure minimal impact to the dolphins. Co-management with local communities would be ideal, to promote adherence to any guidelines developed, especially as enforcement in these remote areas would be difficult;*
- 2. Local authorities, tour operators and researchers monitor the situation as systematically as possible, to determine when this activity occurs, exactly where feeding operations are located, and how often*

dolphins are fed; and

3. *Studies be conducted by qualified scientists to document impacts to dolphins. One approach, which we **encourage**, is to assess vital rates (including calf survival) and population trends of provisioned versus unprovisioned dolphins where possible.*

*The subcommittee **encouraged** the authors to report any updates to SC70.*

Wherever this activity is already occurring, every effort should be made to leverage the economic benefit the dolphins provide into conservation action, such as riverbank clean-ups by local people and tourists. The subcommittee **agreed** to incorporate this situation in the Amazon into the work stream of the intersessional correspondence group on human-induced behavioural changes (Table 2).

There was some discussion about tourism carrying capacity (i.e., how many boats or people are suitable) for areas with cetacean-related tourism, including whale watching and dolphin feeding. It was noted that there are papers forthcoming about how to determine tourism carrying capacity. In addition to understanding how the number of boats or swimmers might impact cetaceans, there may also be impacts on visitor's experiences from large numbers of boats or tourists. It may be easier, politically, to justify limiting tourist presence because it is harming the visitor experience (diminishing the product value) rather than because it may harm the animals. The Subcommittee **encouraged** the submission at future meetings of papers on determining tourism carrying capacity, even in terrestrial or other marine (e.g. coral reef) situations, as these would be helpful to subcommittee discussions under this item.

Aguilar reported that, in the Canary Islands, Association TONINA monitored the cortisol levels of short-finned pilot whales (*Globicephala macrorhynchus*), in an area where whales are subject to intense whale watching and in a 'control' area. The same study was expanded to compare cortisol levels of pilot whales during the COVID-19 pandemic travel lockdown (before and after), which showed lower levels during the suspension of whale watching operations. The results are being prepared for publication and will be presented at SC70.

In further discussion, it was noted that this Item encompasses the principal work of the Subcommittee. Therefore, the subcommittee needs to determine how best to encourage future submissions (see Item 7 for further discussion).

3. PROGRESS WITH REGIONAL REVIEWS OF WHALE WATCHING

3.1 Sri Lanka

Parsons provided information on data that he had collected off the coast of Mirissa, southwest Sri Lanka, in 2019. Sri Lanka does have whale watching regulations (Sea mammals (observation, regulation and control) regulations No. 1 of 2012, under the Flora and Fauna Protection Ordinance). These regulations require vessels to switch off their engines at 100m from cetaceans and to approach no closer than 50m (Schedule III § 5). However, with about 8hrs of observations of whale watching vessels when whales were in proximity (78% with pygmy blue whales [*Balaenoptera musculus breviceauda*]), vessels were closer than 50m, 58% of the time. Most observations (57%) were of a single vessel, but in one instance up to six vessels were observed within this radius. Vessels were between 50–100m of whales 20% of the time; 37% of this time was of a single vessel, but up to nine vessels at one time were observed in this zone. Up to 18 vessels were observed within a 500m radius of whales. In total, there was non-compliance with approach distances 77% of the time. The whale watching regulations are supposed to be enforced by the Sri Lankan coast guard, but 82% of the time when coast guard vessels were present, whale watching boats were violating the regulations. There was thus a very high rate of non-compliance and negligible enforcement. Parsons noted that there is drone footage of whale reactions to whale watching approaches here, but no analysis has been completed

to date.

Li noted that he had recently been in Sri Lanka for one week of field work and observed extremely concerning behaviour by multiple boats around increasingly rare whales. He noted that blue whales (*B. musculus*) were not observed for more than 50 days between January and March 2024 and he saw only one or two Bryde's whale (*B. brydei*). There were many boats (at times more than 10) watching any whale that was seen. Pollution from a fire at the end of May 2021 on the cargo ship X-PRESS PEARL (with 1,486 containers on board carrying, *inter alia*, 25 tons of nitric acid, caustic soda, solid sodium methoxide solution, cosmetics, methanol and vinyl acetate, as well as plastic pellets), near the commercial shipping harbour of Colombo (Sri Lanka's capital), may be entering the marine environment, which could also be a factor in the increasing rarity of whales in recent years. Li stated that few boats seemed to be following any whale watching regulations. Many vessels he observed were fast motorboats, which crowded around any whale. There is an urgent need for research on whale watching impacts in Sri Lankan waters (see, e.g. Sankalpa *et al.*, 2021; Kirumbara *et al.*, 2022). It is possible a China-Sri Lanka joint research team will expand their field studies here, using emerging technologies.

The subcommittee agreed to keep Sri Lanka on its list of regions of concern and encouraged the submission of papers on whale watching activities and impacts there at SC70.

3.2 Latin America

SC/69/B/WW/05rev1 reported on swimming with cetaceans in Mexico, where this activity is illegal. However, it has been increasing in the number of species targeted and locations. Most sites that offer this activity are not protected areas, making regulation difficult. This document presented the Proposal for Regional Protection Programs (RPP) to protect large whale species as a strategy that can potentially help control these activities. These RPPs involve authorities, local communities, academia and civil society. These proposed areas align with Important Marine Mammal Areas designated by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and the World Commission on Protected Areas.

The subcommittee thanked the authors for continuing to provide updates on this concerning situation. There was discussion about developing a systematic monitoring programme; the authors concurred this was a next step, but noted doing so might prove difficult, as operators are keen to hide this illegal activity and the areas where it occurs are remote and expensive to reach and work in. In short, it is difficult to 'catch them in the act'. However, the problem arose with killer whales (*Orcinus orca*; see IWC, 2023), whose general movements are known and seasonal, so monitoring of the animals may lead to observation of the activity. This will be pursued.

One of the Mexican agencies was reluctant to address this situation. However, the Commission of Natural Protected Areas (CONANP) is close to publishing and implementing the Regional Protection Plan (RPP) described in WW/05Rev1. The subcommittee **commended** CONANP's effort.

The Subcommittee requested another update on this situation at SC70.

Attention: CG, S

*The subcommittee **strongly recommends** that the Government of Mexico adopt as soon as possible the Regional Protection Plan (RPP), as described in SC/69/B/WW05Rev1, for the Baja California Peninsula. Illegal swimming with cetaceans is now occurring here, involving multiple species, including killer whales, Bryde's whales and blue whales. This illegal activity is potentially harmful to the animals, as it can involve intense harassment to put tourists in the water near them, and potentially dangerous for swimmers, especially when entering the water near killer whales. The authors of WW/05rev1 were invited to*

participate in the development of the RPP, which is currently being reviewed by the Mexican Commission of Protected Natural Areas.

*The subcommittee also **recommends** that the Secretariat liaise with the Commission of Protected Natural Areas and SEMARNAT, the relevant Mexican government agency, to offer assistance from subcommittee members to review and provide feedback on the proposed Regional Protection Plan. The subcommittee stands ready to provide its expertise during the intersessional period.*

*Finally, the Subcommittee repeated its **strong concern** regarding the swim-with-cetacean activities occurring around the Baja California Peninsula. As noted above, these activities are illegal under Mexican law and are not regulated. The subcommittee **strongly recommended** that the situation be addressed as a matter of urgency, to protect the animals and swimmers.*

The Subcommittee received an update on the dolphin watching situation in Bocas del Toro, Panama, the focus of previous subcommittee interest (e.g., IWC, 2018) and a number of recommendations (e.g., SC18134, SC1954). Trejos reported that the pandemic lockdown provided a chance to collect control data on Dolphin Bay dolphins. Without tour boats, there was less noise and more (and more diverse) dolphin vocalisations detected, which suggested their increased presence. This highlights the significant effects of unregulated tourism activities on dolphin habitats and behaviour, emphasising the need for enforcement of regulations (Gagne *et al.*, 2022). In addition, dolphin watching tourism in Bocas del Toro decreased in the past year.

Results from a study conducted before the lockdown on glucocorticoid hormones in dolphins exposed to boat traffic and tourism in Bocas del Toro suggest higher cortisol levels in crowded boat conditions, indicating potential chronic stress and population impacts (Perez-Ortega, in review). Local leaders, the local community organisation and scientists continue efforts to regulate boat activities. Following these research results, the new head of Bastimentos Marine Park and the community organisation are leading a proposal to make Dolphin Bay a marine protected area, which would be under co-management.

3.3 Timor-Leste

Porter reported on the situation in Timor-Leste. She and C. Bell, the Chair of the Conservation Committee's Standing Working Group on Whale Watching, visited Timor-Leste for 10 days in November 2023, at the invitation of the Assosiasaun Turizmu Maritima iha Timor-Leste (ATM-TL). They met with whale watching operators and other marine tourism stakeholders, to observe practices during the first fully open blue whale migration season since COVID-19 travel restrictions eased. This was also the first year that the newly endorsed whale watching guidelines have been formally in effect. Local operators were open, communicative, and freely shared their experiences, as well as footage they had archived from previous whale watching years. Porter and Bell also filmed multiple 'swim with' interactions, using an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) and underwater cameras. The goal was to analyse these data for SC/69/B; however, there were terabytes of video data (and additional footage is still being received) and it was not possible to do a proper analysis in this time frame. The footage documents whale watching interactions with at least five species during several different types of vessel approaches. There are multiple recordings of interactions with blue and sperm whales (*Physeter macrocephalus*), in addition to short-finned pilot whales, Risso's dolphins (*Grampus griseus*) and pantropical spotted dolphins (*Stenella attenuata*). Other species may be identified in the footage. This rich cache of imagery has the potential, if properly analysed, to better understand the behaviour of multiple species that are involved in swim-with-cetacean tourism. Recommending an analysis of this dataset may encourage the contribution of voluntary funds to complete it. It may also be possible to support an intern through IWC's existing internship programme. To date, a local researcher/student

to participate in the analysis has not been identified.

During the pandemic lockdown, Porter attended several virtual meetings of the ATM-TL. There is a new chair who seeks to progress the following suggestions:

1. Provide training to locally recruited whale watching crews as part of local community education and development; and
2. Organise a disentanglement training workshop, given there have been several whales sighted with trailing lines.

Recommending that the Commission support these initiatives would allow external fund-raising to progress and, hopefully, find support for the training requested by the whale watching community of Timor-Leste.

The Subcommittee **welcomed** the establishment of whale watching regulations in Timor-Leste. It was noted that swim-with-cetacean activities are addressed in the IWC General Principles for Whale Watching.

It was noted that there was discussion of blue whales and whale watching activities in Annex P, Item 3.3.

It was also noted that the imagery dataset was not collected under a systematic survey design, but it is still of considerable value for describing reactions of cetaceans to whale watching approaches and swimmers, given the large number of interactions recorded. The subcommittee discussed preparing a proposal for analysing these data, which could include potential sources for funding and identifying analysts. It was suggested that a local individual, perhaps a local whale watching operator, be part of preparing this proposal. One possible source of funds is the Pacific Whale Foundation, which has in the past been supportive with funding work on whale watching impacts in low-income regions. The Secretariat could assist by communicating with the Commission and potential funders (such as NGOs) regarding the need for funds for this purpose, at IWC/69 or via circulars. Contributing to the Carole Carlson Memorial Fund would be an ideal mechanism for assuring funds for this purpose were made available.

Further discussion addressed current whale watching practices in Timor-Leste. The purpose in conducting an analysis of the imagery dataset and for holding a training workshop would be to determine if current practices are environmentally sustainable. Local whale watching operators seem truly interested in conducting their activities with minimal impact on cetaceans and believe they are behaving appropriately, but there is as yet little or no science to confirm this. If the data analysis showed an impact, practices could be adjusted. It was noted that, should a workshop be held in Timor-Leste, this might positively influence neighbouring regions, including the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). It was also noted that there are foreign whale watching operations and documentary filmmakers found in the waters of Timor-Leste, who generally do not follow the regulations. Some outside individuals are aggressive about approaching cetaceans.

The subcommittee **agreed** to establish an intersessional steering group to facilitate processing proposals submitted to the Carole Carlson Memorial Fund (see Item 7 and Table 2), via the Voluntary Conservation Fund. Suydam was appointed convenor.

The request from the ATM-TL to offer a disentanglement workshop will be communicated to the Human-Induced Mortality Subcommittee. It was noted that strandings rarely happen in Timor-Leste, given its coastal geography and currents.

Attention: SC, C, S

The Subcommittee **recommended** that an analysis be conducted of the video and photographic imagery provided by Timor-Leste whale watching operators to the co-convenors of the Timor-Leste intersessional correspondence group (Table 2), with results to be presented at SC70. These results would include describing the reactions of cetaceans to swim-with encounters and other whale watching approaches. It **recommended** the intersessional group and a local whale watching operator prepare a proposal for this analysis, which would include a budget and a request for funding via voluntary contributions from parties interested in capacity-building in the South Pacific and in conservation of cetaceans in this region. The Carole Carlson Memorial Fund, held by the Secretariat, is also a potential source of funds for this project and the proposal procedure for the Voluntary Conservation Fund should be followed. The Subcommittee requested that the Secretariat announce the need for funding this analysis to the Commission at IWC69 or through an intersessional circular and explore identifying an intern through its internship programme with Oxford and Cambridge Universities to conduct this analysis.

In addition, the subcommittee **recommended** that a workshop for training of local whale watching operators in Timor-Leste, based on the [IWC General Principles for Whale Watching](#), be organised and conducted during the biennium, as requested by the Assosiasaun Turizmu Maritima iha Timor-Leste. This workshop would be best organised and conducted under the auspices of the Standing Working Group on Whale Watching of the Conservation Committee.

3.4 Southern Ocean Sanctuary

Parsons noted that, during the Southern Ocean Sanctuary review, the possible negative impacts of tourism and whale watching were discussed (see Annex N, Appendix 3, under 'Tourism and Whale Watching'), in particular the rise in Antarctic tourism post-pandemic. However, the positive impacts of tourism were also acknowledged, including education and conservation outreach, as well as using tourism vessels as platforms of opportunity. In addition, the General Principles for whale watching (see Item 3.3) had been important in developing the International Association of Antarctic Tourism Operators' (IAATO) [Guidelines for Tourist Operations in Antarctica](#).

Babey reported that ORCA, a British non-profit organisation, have been working with Antarctic tourism providers to utilise their vessels as platforms of opportunity for cetacean research, including doing distance sampling and line transect surveys. The subcommittee **welcomed** this information and requested that updates on ORCA's research be presented at a future meeting.

3.5 Other priority regions

Lysenko and Evangelista reported that the Dominican Republic has guidelines and regulations for whale watching tourism activities that have developed over the years in Samaná Bay, which has been part of the Banco de la Plata and Navidad Marine Mammal Sanctuary since 1986. They noted that it is therefore necessary to continue to conduct research that considers all threats and to develop and implement research and conservation actions, especially for newly declared protected areas such as the Cordillera de Beata Marine Sanctuary. Results of this research will be presented at future SC meetings. It was noted that the Society for Marine Mammalogy biennial conference would be in Puerto Rico in 2026. This would be a good opportunity for the subcommittee to hold a workshop (see Item 7) on whale watching in the Caribbean region. The subcommittee agreed to establish an intersessional correspondence group to prepare a workshop proposal for the next Biennial Conference on Marine Mammal Biology of the Society for Marine Mammalogy in Puerto Rico, USA, in 2026, focusing on whale watching in the Caribbean. Parsons was appointed convenor (see Table 2).

Li reported that whale watching is starting to develop in China. There are some good coastal locations

for this activity, targeting small and large cetaceans. Regulations are being developed, but more research is needed to determine potential impacts from whale watching; studies are underway. The subcommittee thanked Li for bringing this information forward, **agreed** to consider China as a future priority region and invited Li to present research results to the subcommittee at future meetings.

4. COLLABORATIVE WORK WITHIN THE IWC

4.1 Update on the IWC's Whale Watching Handbook

SC/69B/WW/04 provided an update on work on the online Whale Watching Handbook in 2023. The paper's Annex 1 listed possible priorities for new content; additional suggestions were invited from the subcommittee. The Handbook's table of literature was updated as resources allowed and now features the details and abstracts of almost 600 reports and peer-reviewed journal articles on whale watching. The Secretariat requested subcommittee members to continue to submit papers to allow them to keep this table up to date. The paper also reported that the Standing Working Group on Whale Watching (SWG) welcomed Catherine Bell earlier this year and thanked her for stepping into the role of chair. SWG membership remains open, particularly for new members from the regions of Asia and Africa.

Additionally, the paper outlined some key activities wherein the Secretariat engaged with other organisations focusing on whale watching. These included ongoing discussions with, and a recent presentation to, IORA and its Sustainable Whale Watching Network members; participating in a Stakeholders Workshop with Ocean Governance late last year; and ongoing communication with the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS), regarding the recently adopted [Guidelines for Recreational In-Water Interactions with Marine Wildlife](#). Finally, the paper reported that the Whale Watching Strategic Plan and workplan both expire this year (2024) and new plans have been drafted (Annexes 3 and 4, in SC/69B/WW/04) for comment by the Subcommittee. These, along with any comments on the outcome of the Review of the Strategic Plan (SC/69B/WW/06), will be taken into consideration before revision and further development to present to the Conservation Committee and for endorsement at IWC69.

A brief discussion confirmed that the CMS Guidelines for Recreational In-Water Interactions with Marine Wildlife should be incorporated in the Handbook by preparing a dedicated landing page with a link to the CMS web page hosting the Guidelines. A link to the Guidelines should also be provided in the Handbook's Download Resources menu.

4.2 Communication with Conservation Committee's Standing Working Group on Whale Watching

SC/69B/WW/06 was produced in response to recommendation SC2297 (2022), in which the subcommittee requested a full review of outputs from the expiring Strategic Plan for Whale Watching. The SWG looked at the actions outlined under each of the three objectives of the plan to determine what had been achieved and what next steps could be considered when developing the new Strategic Plan for 2025–34. The Secretariat highlighted that the SWG was not aware of outputs or progress on some actions, including Actions 2.4 and 3.2. Additionally, Action 1.3 (Identify and facilitate opportunities for the transfer of best possible practice approaches to meet identified capacity building needs) has had limited progress; however, to some extent the developing work with IORA and other regional bodies contributes to this action.

In addition, Action 1.6 was mentioned with regards to the development of a merged whale watching communications plan. Parsons *et al.* (2023), presented at SC69A, was forwarded to the Joint Conservation Committee-Scientific Committee Working Group where it was agreed that the existing Conservation Committee communications plan would be merged with Parsons *et al.* (2023) and a joint Steering Group established, which was done intersessionally. New members are welcome. Specific objectives of the current version of the communications plan (v6) are: (1) to increase use of the French

language section of the Handbook; (2) to focus on Asia and Africa, both in terms of generating new content relevant to these regions and raising awareness of the Handbook in those regions; and (3) to pursue a running objective of raising awareness of IWC work on whale watching wherever opportunities arise.

Further to considering the actions outlined in the Strategic Plan, the SWG also looked at both the number of papers submitted to this subcommittee and the recommendations made and whether they were acted on since 2018. Last year, 23 recommendations were closed and a further 32 were proposed for closure at this meeting. After considering all these points, the SWG proposed to carry over all existing actions to the new Strategic Plan, included as a draft in WW/04 as Annex 3.

In a discussion of the communications plan, it was noted that the Secretariat has challenges with promoting the work of the SWG and the subcommittee. Whale watching operators do not follow (or may not even be aware of) IWC-branded social media, and the Secretariat is currently restricted to X/Twitter and posting through third party platforms on Facebook. It is incumbent on subcommittee members to promote the work of the subcommittee on their own social media. The Secretariat has a number of outreach products that have been developed for this purpose and are available to all members. It was also noted that, whilst we want to ensure our information is seen by a large audience, we have limited tools with which to circulate this information, especially without additional funding (which could, for example, come from contracting governments or NGOs). In response, the Secretariat noted that much can be accomplished in terms of communicating with the public with free-to-use PR tools such as article placement, interviews and presentations at events.

It was clarified that any input from the Subcommittee on the draft Strategic Plan for 2025–2034 should be sent to the Secretariat as soon as possible and well before September 2024, when IWC69 is to take place.

Attention: SC, S

*The public, research communities, governments and other whale watching stakeholders may be unaware of the work of the Whale Watching Subcommittee (WW) and Standing Working Group on Whale Watching (SWG) and it is an ongoing objective of both to seek new and effective ways to communicate their work to these audiences. The subcommittee **recommended** that:*

- 1. All members of the subcommittee work intersessionally to promote the Handbook and other outputs of WW and the SWG, via individual and organisational social media and other means (e.g. mentions in presentations at conferences);*
- 2. Subcommittee members communicate potential sources of outside funding for the joint WW/SWG communications plan to the Secretariat as soon as possible; and*
- 3. The Secretariat approach these potential funding sources to seek funding specifically for the communications plan and the Carole Carlson Memorial Fund.*

In discussion of the SWG draft workplan for 2025-28 (Annex 4 of WW/06), it was noted that Objective 3 (Research and Data Collection) was most relevant to the subcommittee. Particular note was made of Action 3.1, regarding the Modelling and Assessment of Whale Watching Impacts (MAWI) initiative. New, the MAWI Intersessional Steering Group (ISG) co-convenor, noted that without funding and due to the pandemic, planning a third workshop, which would focus on modelling approaches and statistical tools, has been difficult. However, she believes this effort should be revived and the plan to distribute a questionnaire to modelling and statistics specialists before such a workshop should be pursued. A discussion considered possibly scheduling this workshop to coincide with the next

conference of the European Cetacean Society (ECS), which will be in the Azores in 2025. Suggestions for questionnaire distribution included asking the Secretariat to distribute it or using one or more social media platforms. New replied that, whilst the third workshop would focus on modelling and statistical tools, the ECS might be a good place to find cetacean biologists with strong quantitative backgrounds as participants - as the ISG co-convenor, she will discuss planning a workshop at the Azores conference with the ECS president and will also investigate the possibility of a workshop to be held in conjunction with one of several upcoming statistical conferences.

The first bullet point of Action 3.2, regarding a long-term integrated research programme, was an ambitious idea that has proved impractical to pursue. However, the idea of using data collected on whale behaviour in whale watching areas that were relatively undisturbed during the pandemic years (see Item 7) as controls for impact studies is one possible way to take aspects of this idea forward. It was suggested that the SWG rework Action 3.2 for the new workplan, per the input during this discussion.

Finally, regarding Action 3.4, on integrating social science into the work of the subcommittee, it was suggested that an ECS workshop might help progress this action as well. An intersessional correspondence group could prepare a workshop proposal to submit to the Azores conference organising committee. Social scientists—or those who use social science approaches when conducting whale watching-related research—do attend the ECS, so this might be a good venue. Another possible venue is the conference of the Society for Conservation Biology, which has a social science group.

Attention: SC

*The Subcommittee **agreed** that Action 3.4 of the proposed workplan for 2025-28 of the Standing Working Group for Whale Watching, regarding the integration of social sciences into the work of the subcommittee, should be a focused pursuit during the biennium. It **agreed** to establish an intersessional correspondence group (see Table 2) to prepare a workshop proposal for the next conference of the European Cetacean Society in the Azores, where social scientists will be identified and invited to participate to help develop an approach to integrate social science with the ecological research typically considered by the subcommittee, to inform whale watching management and future research projects. Parsons was appointed convenor.*

4.3 Collaboration with other SC subgroups on platforms of opportunity and citizen science

No papers were received for this item.

5. ICG REPORT

SC/69B/WW/01 reported on the activities of the human-induced behavioural changes (HIBC) intersessional correspondence group (ICG). The ICG's terms of reference are to: (1) continue to monitor the relevant literature on, e.g., solitary sociable cetaceans, out of habitat cetaceans and seek to produce a new review of information for the Committee across the whole range of interactions with humans; (2) review appropriate terminology (e.g., 'habituation'); and (3) continue to consider the relevance of this topic to the work of the subcommittee, including how this topic might best be studied in the future. Some members of the group have been involved in the development of a paper on 'out of habitat' marine mammals, which is currently in review and should be available for the subcommittee to consider in due course. Meanwhile, there are two workshop reports available on this topic (Anon., 2021, 2023; see also Nunny & Simmonds, 2020).

The ICG identified several new publications. Greenfield et al. (2020), in one of the first studies of its kind, considered the effects of human-induced injuries on dolphin fitness. They noted that 'injuries

that potentially remove an individual from its association network may disrupt [important social] interactions'. They found that injured dolphins had fewer preferred associates and were found in more fluid groups immediately after injury. McHugh *et al.* (2020) presented data from 27 well-documented common bottlenose dolphin rescues (1985-2019). Nearly all rescued individuals (92%) survived longer than six weeks post-release and 13 were still observed frequently within their prior resident communities, in good physical health and engaging in normal behaviour. Four rescued females produced 12 offspring post-rescue. Population viability modelling suggested that interventions promoted long-term conservation benefits.

Longden *et al.* (2022) considered the effects of changes in vessel activity during the pandemic in Sarasota Bay. Vessel activity increased during COVID-19 restrictions by almost 80% at one site and remained the same at another site. Dolphin whistle detection remained the same at the site that experienced increased vessel activity but decreased at the other site. The authors suggested that the pandemic's effects on wildlife should not be viewed as homogeneous globally. DiMaggio *et al.* (2023) reported on data from 1993 to 2020 from the world's longest-running study of a wild dolphin population to assess the fitness consequences of Human-Wildlife Interactions (HI) on common bottlenose dolphins. Reproductive output of females engaging in moderate levels of human-related foraging was 94% greater than that of non-HI females. However, high frequencies of human-related foraging had a negative effect on female reproductive success by increasing the risk of calf death up to nine times when compared to non-HI females. These findings provide evidence that human-wildlife interactions have the potential to catalyse population-level changes by altering individual fitness.

Carzon *et al.* (2023) reviewed over 40 years of literature on the deleterious behaviours and risks documented during interactions between humans and free-ranging dolphins during ongoing tourist and other recreational activities, as well as between humans and solitary sociable dolphins. Loss of vigilance toward humans and human activities was reported for both solitary sociable dolphins and those involved in ongoing activities. Additionally, Nunny and Simmonds (2022) considered a number of case studies of 'solitary sociable dolphins', of which more than three dozen have been recorded since 2008. They commented that the 'highly social nature of many small cetaceans, which can even extend to animals outside of their own species [...] may help to explain why they sometimes form associations with people'.

Finally, in their recent review of human impacts on dolphins, Wells and Fahlman (2024) conclude the following: 'Dolphins in inshore waters are usually not given the option of dealing with one threat at a time. They face multiple concurrent and cumulative threats from natural and anthropogenic sources [...]. It is up to humans to reduce the threats that are within their power to control, to give the dolphins more degrees of freedom to cope with and adapt to the remaining threats'. The ICG concluded that the conservation implications of human-induced behavioural changes are becoming more apparent and better documented.

The subcommittee **agreed** to maintain the ICG on HIBC (see Table 2) and requested that it report back on progress at SC70. It was noted that the work of this ICG was featured on a marine science podcast, which is an example of the type of communications outreach subcommittee members can undertake intersessionally. In response to a question, it was noted that Anonymous (2023) has a good description of how people should respond when they encounter an out-of-habitat marine mammal, and indeed some jurisdictions, including Germany, have official guidelines.

In addition, the subcommittee **agreed** to maintain all other ICGs currently active (see Table 2).

6. PROGRESS ON PREVIOUS RECOMMENDATIONS

Of the recommendations still open from 2018, the subcommittee **agreed** to close those that are

procedural or directives to the subcommittee or SWG (most of which have been accomplished), but to leave open those related to the longer-term work stream. Webster volunteered to update the recommendation database.

7. BIENNIAL WORKPLAN; FUTURE OF THE WW SUBCOMMITTEE

There was an in-depth discussion of the future of the subcommittee. It was noted that it has always been difficult to identify and bring IPs to the subcommittee meetings, as the regions of concern tend to include low- and middle-income countries. Virtual sessions or hybrid meetings could help in this regard, allowing researchers with relevant data and expertise to participate while reducing ‘attendance’ costs. Virtual sessions would also allow intersessional work to be conducted by the full subcommittee. The Secretariat might be able to support virtual sessions, but if additional funding for IT support is needed, requests would be appropriate to governments interested in whale watching and capacity building in low- and middle-income countries.

Future work could focus each meeting on either one or two of the five topics under Item 2, or on specific regions (see Item 3). The Subcommittee has already identified several countries and regions of concern, including Latin America, Sri Lanka and Timor-Leste. Further discussion considered whether the subcommittee should prioritise these areas of concern. However, until the SC has determined how future meetings will be conducted—including how long meetings will be—it will be difficult to determine the specifics of the subcommittee’s future. It was noted that, if the 2026 meeting is in-person and not in Bled, then the Subcommittee should ensure a regional review of whale watching is presented, as has occurred in the past.

The topic of emerging technologies was identified as the subject of recent research papers examining the use of drones (see, e.g. Smith *et al.*, 2016), remotely operated vehicles, and other emerging technologies in whale watching operations and other tourism activities focused on marine life. The subcommittee agreed that the agenda should focus on emerging technologies at SC70.

It was noted that a considerable amount of research on whale watching impacts has been published in the peer-reviewed scientific literature in recent years. In the past, Parsons and colleagues had submitted an annual digest of such publications—summaries of recent peer-reviewed publications on assessing whale watching impacts (e.g., Gleason & Parsons, 2019; Parsons *et al.*, 2018a, 2018b, 2017—these digests go back to 2006). Whilst preparing this digest requires considerable time and effort, it is an efficient way for the subcommittee to review and consider relevant research. In addition, the authors of such publications are ideal candidates to be invited to present to the subcommittee in the future.

Attention: SC, Parsons

*Noting the shift to biennial meetings, the Subcommittee **recommended** that intersessional work for SC70 (2026) include the preparation of a digest of peer-reviewed papers published during the biennium by Parsons and his colleagues, as were prepared for previous meetings (e.g., Parsons *et al.*, 2018a, b). These digests proved quite useful in previous meetings. The digest should focus on emerging technologies but could include papers addressing all five topics of Item 2 of the subcommittee agenda (Appendix 1).*

Additional discussion considered whether the subcommittee would meet intersessionally, perhaps with a relatively brief (e.g., half-day) virtual meeting. The Secretariat noted that it stands ready with IT support for such virtual meetings. It was suggested that if any intersessional subcommittee or ICG meetings take place, it would be helpful to have a representative of the Secretariat on the call, to provide assistance and input where needed.

It was noted that several studies about the impacts to cetaceans from whale watching activities took place during the pandemic lockdown (see, e.g. Gagne *et al.*, 2022; Longden *et al.*, 2022), allowing the collection of what was essentially baseline data on populations normally targeted by active whale watching industries, but during a period when no whale watching activities took place. These studies are now being published. It would be ideal to bring these results to the subcommittee as guidance for future work and to incorporate their results into the MAWI initiative (see Item 4.2).

A discussion followed about seeking external funding for the subcommittee’s work, including from the whale watching industry, governments, NGOs and IGOs. The Carole Carlson Memorial Fund could be used for this purpose (see Item 3.3 and Table 2). It was noted that a report on the potential for external funding was prepared for the Secretariat; the subcommittee should review that report. It should also seek assistance from the Secretariat’s fundraising staff.

It was also noted that, if the subcommittee is to seek outside funding, it needs to better communicate its work to a wider audience. Representatives of the Subcommittee could conduct formal outreach, via pre-meetings or workshops, on behalf of the Subcommittee, at scientific conferences they are already attending. Those efforts would help inform the relevant research community of the work of the subcommittee and its suitability as a forum for presenting their work. See Items 2.1 and 4.2 for some ideas about how to approach this need. The Subcommittee was also reminded of the Communications Steering Group and the joint communications plan. Funding remains an issue for this steering group’s planned work stream.

Table 1
Summary of the workplan for matters related to whale watching. Several of these Items have intersessional correspondence groups (ICG) or intersessional steering groups (ISG). Those groups will work intersessionally and provide updates at the next meeting.

Item	Intersessional 2024/26	2026 Annual Meeting (SC70)
Subcommittee meeting	Virtual meeting	In-person meeting (SC70)
Assess the impacts of whale watching on cetaceans – PRIORITY	Prepare papers; identify researchers in the whale watching arena and encourage them to prepare and submit papers	Present papers
(i) Short-term impacts		
(ii) Mid- and long-term impacts		
(iii) Swim-with operations		
(iv) Emerging issues of concern, e.g. solitary sociable and out of habitat cetaceans		
(v) Emerging technology, e.g. drones and other emerging technology in the context of whale watching		
MAWI	Email correspondence and workshop	Present workshop report
Review whale watching in priority regions/areas (e.g. Sri Lanka, Latin America, Timor-Leste, Southern Ocean Sanctuary, China) or on priority populations identified intersessionally	Intersessional correspondence and work, including soliciting papers	Present papers
Intersessional correspondence groups	Email correspondence and work	Receive reports
Collaborative work with other sub-committees, particularly regarding platforms of opportunity and citizen science data	Email correspondence and work	Present papers, receive updates
Collaborative work with Conservation Committee (SWG on Whale Watching), including communications output and reviewing and updating the Handbook	Intersessional correspondence and work	Present updates on SWG WW work and communications plan outputs

Table 2
Interseasonal E-mail Groups

Item		Title	Terms of reference	Members
Item 17.1 WW	ISG	Modelling and Assessment of Whale Watching Impacts (MAWI) Steering Group	Planning for and distributing the questionnaire, analysing the results; preparing a proposal for a workshop at the 2025 ECS conference	New, Suydam (co-Convenors), Baldwin, Cooke, Cosentino, Currie, Forestell, Frey, Jiménez-Assmus, Leaper, Miketa, Minton, Noren, Parsons, Reyes, Robbins, Rose, C. Smith, Vermeulen, Weinrich, Urbán, Webster <i>Email: modassmawi@groups.iwc.int</i>
Item 17.1 WW	ICG	Human-induced behavioural changes of concern	Continue to monitor and report on the relevant science, including but not limited to that which relates to solitary sociable cetaceans, out of habitat cetaceans and provisioned cetaceans (e.g., in Pará, Brazil, where tourists feed <i>Inia araguaiaensis</i>); consider the terminology applied to the full range of human-cetacean interactions; and suggest guidelines to avoid damaging interactions.	Simmonds (Convenor), Aranha, Cosentino, Currie, Fonseca, Forestell, Minton, Nunny, Parsons, C. Ryeng, Smith, Suydam, Vail, Wells, Weinrich, Urbán <i>Email: hibcc@groups.iwc.int</i>
Item 17.2.3 WW	ICG	Timor-Leste whale watching	Continue communication with Timor-Leste on development of guidelines and regulations, to facilitate communication between the Committee and the Government of Timor-Leste and the ATM-TL.	Porter, Bell (co-Convenors), Edyvane, Höschle, Noren, Parsons, Rose, Ritter, Suydam, Urbán <i>Email: timorlesteww@groups.iwc.int</i>
Item 17.2.3 WW	ISG	Carole Carlson Memorial Fund	Invite and facilitate the submission of proposals to the Fund	Suydam (Convenor)
Item 17.2.5 WW	ICG	Workshop on Caribbean whale watching	Develop a workshop proposal for an updated assessment of whale watching in the Wider Caribbean Region, to be held at the 2026 Biennial Conference for Marine Mammal Biology of the Society for Marine Mammalogy in Puerto Rico, USA	Parsons (Convenor)
Item 17.3.2 WW	ICG	Communication between the CC's SWG on whale watching and WW	Continue and enhance methods for disseminating information and advice between the SWG and WW.	Iñiguez (Convenor), Parsons, Rojas-Bracho, Simmonds, Slooten, Suydam, Urbán
Item 17.3.2 WW	ICG	Workshop at European Cetacean Society 2025 conference in the Azores	Develop a workshop proposal for integrating social science into the work of the IWC Scientific Committee's Whale Watching Subcommittee	Parsons (Convenor)

8. ADOPTION OF THE REPORT

The report was adopted at 18:00 hrs on 26 April 2024. The subcommittee thanked Suydam and Urbán for their able chairing and Rose for rapporteuring.

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Appendix 1

AGENDA

1. Introductory items
 - 1.1 Convenors' opening remarks
 - 1.2 Election of Chair and Co-chair
 - 1.3 Appointment of rapporteur
 - 1.4 Adoption of Agenda
 - 1.5 Review of available documents
2. Assess the impacts of whale watching and swim-with-whale operations on cetaceans
 - 2.1 Studies on assessing impacts: (1) short-term; (2) mid- to long-term; (3) swim-with operations; (4) emerging issues of concern; and (5) emerging technology
3. Progress with regional reviews of whale watching
 - 3.1 Sri Lanka
 - 3.2 Latin America
 - 3.3 Timor-Leste
 - 3.4 Southern Ocean Sanctuary
 - 3.5 Other priority regions
4. Collaborative work within the IWC
 - 4.1 Update on IWC's Whale Watching Handbook
 - 4.2 Communication with Conservation Committee's Standing Working Group on Whale Watching
 - 4.3 Collaboration with other SC subgroups on platforms of opportunity and citizen science
5. ICG reports
6. Progress on previous recommendations
7. Biennial workplan and future of the WW Subcommittee