

## PRESS RELEASE - DAY 1 - 11 JULY 2011

Proceedings of the 63rd Annual Meeting of the International Whaling Commission, held in St Helier, began today (Monday 11th July) with a speech of welcome by Senator Alan Maclean, Economic Development Minister of the States of Jersey.

There is one new member to the Commission, Columbia, bringing the total to 89, of which 54 were present on the first day. The full list of member countries can be found [HERE](#). Due to new domestic duties and responsibilities, Ambassador Anthony Liverpool, Vice-Chair and Acting Chair of the Commission had announced his resignation to take effect on the opening day of the meeting. In these circumstances, the Commission was delighted that the Commissioner for South Africa, Herman Oosthuizen, had agreed to act as the Chair of the Meeting. Elections for Chair and Vice-Chair will take place on the final day of the meeting as is customary practice.

After the usual introductory items, including an overview of [available documents](#), the meeting adopted its Agenda.

The first major item of business was consideration of the **status of whale stocks**.

The Commission then received the [Report of the Scientific Committee](#) on the **status of whale stocks**. The Scientific Committee is conducting in-depth assessments of several populations and species. The objective is to determine the present status of populations compared to the past and estimate trends in abundance and possible causes of those trends, with the ultimate aim of identifying if there are anthropogenic threats to status that need to be addressed.

The first group covered was **Antarctic minke whales**. The Committee is finalising its work on abundance estimation. Although this work is not complete, it is clear that between the late 1980s and the turn of the century, there have been significant declines in the abundance estimates in three of the six management areas of the Antarctic. These include areas encompassing the Weddell and Ross Seas where ice conditions are complex and highly variable. The next step is to determine to what extent the estimated declines reflect changes in ice conditions affecting the surveys and to what extent they are real declines in abundance, and to identify the causes of any true declines.

There are seven breeding stocks of **humpback whales in the Southern Hemisphere**. Over the last three few years the Committee has been examining the breeding stock off West Africa. This was heavily reduced by whaling, reaching a low of less than 2,000 animals in the 1960s. The good news is that it is now recovering and now numbers almost 10,000 animals and has probably reached around half of its unexploited size. The Committee will next focus on the breeding stocks off eastern Australia and the central south Pacific. It was pleased this year to receive information that humpback whales off eastern Australia are increasing at around 11% annually.

The Committee completed a circumpolar assessment of **blue whales in the Southern Hemisphere** in 2008 (it is only about 1% of its unexploited size but thankfully is recovering at around 6.5% per annum). The Committee is now collecting information to try and assess blue whales on a regional basis. This year it received information on the small (<1,000) population off Isla da Chiloé. Special attention was paid again this year to the status of the endangered **western North Pacific gray whale**, whose feeding grounds coincide with major oil and gas operations off Sakhalin Island, Russian Federation. The population numbers only about 130 animals. The most interesting new information came from a satellite telemetry programme undertaken last summer under the auspices of the IWC where the single whale tagged (called 'Flex') was unexpectedly found to move across to the eastern Pacific. It is hoped the programme will put tags on up to 12 whales this summer.

Subsequently, additional evidence has been found that some of the animals that regularly feed off Sakhalin sometimes cross to the east. The Committee has strongly endorsed the [draft conservation plan](#) for western North Pacific gray whales and Commission members have agreed to work together to try to mitigate anthropogenic threats to this endangered population. The Committee has great concern over the possible threats to this population from oil and gas activities. It recommended that all companies implement appropriate monitoring and mitigation plans. It also recommended that they share data to allow co-ordinated planning of activities, especially seismic surveys to minimise the impact on gray whales. The Committee welcomed the efforts of Japan to reduce bycatch mortality of gray whales in its waters. Finally, the Committee acknowledged the important work of the

IUCN [Western Gray Whale Advisory Panel](#) and recommended continuation of the Panel beyond 2011.

With respect to **Southern Hemisphere right whales**, most of the Committee's work related to preparations for a major assessment workshop that will take place in Argentina in September. However, the Committee was pleased to receive information that the population surveyed along southern Australia has been increasing at around 7% per year since 1993 and now numbers around 3,500 animals.

Ship strikes and entanglements are a threat to the endangered **western North Atlantic right whale** population which numbers around 300-400 animals. Five deaths and four entanglement cases were reported off the US coast between November 2009 and October 2010. The Committee again expressed grave concern and recommended that anthropogenic mortality should be reduced to zero as soon as possible.

Finally under this item, the Committee reported on its new survey programme in the North Pacific – the **IWC-POWER programme (North Pacific Whale and Ecosystem Research)**. Final middle-long term planning is almost completed and results from the first cruise conducted in 2010 are being examined. The second cruise has just begun. The programme's objective is to obtain information on abundance and trends and to identify the causes of any trends should these be detected. It is particularly important since many of the populations in the central and eastern North Pacific there have not been assessed for decades. The primary tools will be sighting surveys, biopsy sampling and photo-identification. The Committee encouraged all member nations, especially those around the Pacific to participate. It is particularly grateful to the Government of Japan which has donated a research vessel and crew. The international team of scientists have thus far come from Japan, the USA and the Republic of Korea.

The Commission endorsed this part of the report of the Scientific Committee and its recommendations on whale stocks.

The Commission then received the [Report of its Working Group on Whale Killing Methods and associated Animal Welfare Issues](#). The Working Group received reports from five governments, four involved in whaling and one related to euthanasia of stranded animals. It also received reports from Norway with respect to the improvements it had made on killing methods. Using its new penthrite grenade, the mean time to death had decreased to 2 minutes with at least 80% of animals being killed instantly. The working group also heard details of the 2010 hunt for bowhead whales off Alaska and the improvements being made to its hunting equipment with technical co-operation from Norway. The Commission welcomed the reports by governments and the improvements documented.

There was considerable discussion of the report of a [non-IWC workshop sponsored by the UK](#) on the topic of welfare and ethics that had developed conclusions on a number of human-whale interactions including killing and euthanasia; use of whales in invasive research; whalewatching; and ship-strikes and entanglements. Although all governments recognised the importance of the issue, within the working group and the Commission itself there were both critical and supporting comments about the quality of the report. The UK had proposed terms of reference for an [intersessional working group](#) on this subject but there was no consensus within the Commission on its contents. The UK noted that it would continue its own work on this topic.

Last year the IWC held a very successful **IWC workshop on welfare issues associated with the entanglement of large whales**. This year, the Working Group and the Commission endorsed a proposal by Australia Norway and the USA to take forward recommendations from that workshop. The short-term initiatives include: convening a 2nd workshop; beginning capacity building in identified countries and regions; and establishing a standing group of experts to advise member countries upon request. The long-term initiatives include: assisting member countries to undertake research; promoting cooperative research; and identifying experts and sources of further information. An IWC voluntary fund will be established to assist with the cost of these actions. The details can be found in [Appendix 4 of the Working Group report](#).

The final Item considered on Day 1 related to work on the **Revised Management Scheme (RMS)**. Apart from the work of the Scientific Committee on the Revised Management Procedure, the Commission has not focused on this item for several years, rather directing its efforts to discussions on the **Future of the IWC**. In addition to some general matters relating to technical aspects of the

RMP, the Committee focussed on specific implementations and reviews. The purpose of these is to review all of the available information for a specific species/area combination, ensure that scientific uncertainty is fully taken into account through simulation trials, and, should the Commission request it, be able to determine safe catch limits. As there is a moratorium in place on commercial whaling, the Commission does not usually request that the final stage of calculating catch limits occurs, although it did request such information last year in the context of the Future of the IWC discussions. This year the Scientific Committee reported on progress with an Implementation Review of western North Pacific common minke whales. Given the technical complexity, the Committee informed the Commission that the review would now be completed in 2013, rather than the originally anticipated 2012. The Committee also reported on follow-up work related to the completed implementations of western North Pacific Bryde's whales, North Atlantic fin whales and North Atlantic common minke whales. In the Commission discussions, some countries criticised the current catching of fin whales by Iceland.