



# CONVENTION ON MIGRATORY SPECIES

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Agenda Item 6.1

## CONCEPT NOTE: DEVELOPMENT OF A SINGLE SPECIES ACTION PLAN FOR THE BLUE WHALE (*BALAENOPTERA MUSCULUS*)

### Summary

Based on the Memorandum of Collaboration between the CMS Secretariat and WWF Germany, signed in April 2014 and discussions about joint priority activities, the Blue Whale was identified as a species of high interest for cooperation. Especially in the South East Pacific, the development of a regional conservation framework was seen as necessary to increase knowledge, reduce threats and support conservation of the Blue Whale as a CMS Appendix I species.

The CMS Secretariat and WWF Germany are therefore seeking guidance on the proposal to develop a Single Species Action Plan for the Blue Whale.





**DRAFT**  
**(as of 6 June 2014)**

**Concept Note:**  
**Development of a Single Species Action Plan for the Blue Whale**  
**(*Balaenoptera musculus*)**

**Background and Intention:**

Based on the Memorandum of Collaboration between the CMS Secretariat and WWF Germany, signed in April 2014 and discussions about joint priority activities, the Blue Whale was identified as a species of high interest for cooperation. Especially in the South East Pacific, the development of a regional conservation framework is seen as necessary to increase knowledge, reduce threats and support conservation of the Blue Whale as a CMS Appendix I species. In addition, it is expected that any measures taken to improve the Blue Whale's conservation status would equally benefit a number of other CMS-listed species.

The CMS Secretariat and WWF Germany therefore seek guidance on the proposal to develop a Single Species Action Plan for the Blue Whale.

**A. Species description:**

**a) Legal Status**

The Blue Whale was listed on CMS Appendix I in 1979, and added to the list of Concerted Action Species in 2002.

In addition, the species is listed on CITES Appendix I, and subject to the IWC whaling moratorium with a zero catch quota.

**b) Conservation Status**

Blue Whales are classified as *Endangered* on the IUCN Red List, with the population trend indicated as increasing.

“Although there are uncertainties over present abundance, the total population has been depleted by at least 70%, and possibly as much as 90%, over the last three generations, assuming a 31-year average generation time.” (IUCN Red List)

“The global population of blue whales is uncertain, but based on the above information, the global total for the species is plausibly in the range 10,000-25,000, corresponding to about 3-11% of the 1911 population size.” (IUCN Red List)



### c) Taxonomy

The taxonomy of Blue Whales is still being debated. Currently three subspecies are recognized:

- *Balaenoptera musculus musculus* (North Atlantic and North Pacific Oceans)
- *Balaenoptera musculus intermedia* (Antarctic Oceans)
- *Balaenoptera musculus brevipoda* (Southern Indian Ocean)

Some also distinguish a fourth form, *Balaenoptera musculus indica*, in the Northern Indian Ocean.

### d) Migration

“The migration patterns of blue whales are not well understood, but appear to be highly diverse. Some populations appear to be resident year-round in habitats of year-round high productivity, while others undertake long migrations to high-latitude feeding grounds [...], but the extent of migrations and the components of the populations that undertake them are poorly known.” (IUCN Red List)

### e) Threats

The above-mentioned depletion of the global population of blue whales to a fraction of its historical abundance was due to commercial whaling. Since the IWC moratorium came into effect, this threat has been suspended, and most populations/subspecies appear to show signs of recovery.

Current threats to the species include entanglement, ship strikes, underwater noise and potentially effects of climate change, especially loss of sea ice in Antarctic waters. Due to the remote distribution of most populations, they may be less at risk than other species, or risks may be less easily detected.

However, the habitat of specific local populations of Blue Whales may be subject to a range of (increasing) human impacts, including for instance land-based pollution, fisheries, ship traffic, tourism and coastal aquaculture development.

### f) Distribution

The Blue Whale is a species with global distribution. The regions of particular interest for a potential SSAP are:



### *South Pacific:*

“Blue whales occur in the eastern Pacific from around 44°S in southern Chile (Hucke-Gaete *et al.* 2005) as far as the Costa Rica Dome where they are present year-round (Reilly and Thayer 1990). There may be a gap from there to Baja California where they are quite common as also off the Californian coast (Calambokidis and Barlow 2004) but tracking of a tagged whale suggests that some of the Californian whales may migrate to the Costa Rica Dome in winter (Mate *et al.* 1999).” (IUCN Red List)

### *North Pacific:*

“North of 40°N, blue whales occur across the North Pacific from the coast of Oregon to the Kurile Islands (Russian Federation), and north to the Aleutian Islands (US-Alaska) but not far into the Bering Sea. In the past blue whales were caught off southern Japan and the Korean peninsula, but none have been seen there in recent years.” (IUCN Red List)

## **g) Other Ecological/Biological Features**

Blue Whales are the largest animals on the planet, reaching lengths of up to 33 metres and a weight of 150 tons. They have a slow reproduction, with generation time estimated at 31 years.

### **Sources**

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- Hucke-Gaete R., Viddi, F. A. and Bello, M. E. 2005. Blue whales off southern Chile: overview of research achievements and current conservation challenges. International Whaling Commission Scientific Committee.
- IUCN Red List *Balaenoptera musculus*: <http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/full/2477/0>
- IUCN Red List *Balaenoptera musculus* spp. *brevicauda*: <http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/2479/0>
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- US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration: <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/species/mammals/cetaceans/bluewhale.htm>
- Perrin, W. F., Würsig, B., and Thewissen, J. G. M. (Eds.). 2009. Encyclopedia of marine mammals. Second Edition.



## **B. Proposed Steps for Development of a Single Species Action Plan**

### **1) Scientific Council Guidance**

Several points need clarification before work towards a Single Species Action Plan (SSAP) for Blue Whales can commence. The Scientific Council is requested to provide guidance on the following questions:

- Is the development of a SSAP for Blue Whale a priority for CMS?
- What should be the geographic extent of the SSAP? Should it be global or regional? If regional, should only the South East Pacific be covered, or also the North East Pacific?
- Should the SSAP cover all subspecies, or only specific ones?

### **2) Development of more detailed concept**

Based on the guidance received from the Scientific Council, the CMS Secretariat and WWF Germany would develop for presentation at CMS COP11

- A background document on the status of Blue Whales based on scientific information, providing a global overview and focusing in more detail on the South East Pacific, and
- An outline for the SSAP.

### **3) Preparation of a draft SSAP**

Assuming positive feedback from the Scientific Council and the Parties at COP11, the process continues with:

- The preparation of a draft Single Species Action Plan, and
- An expert meeting to discuss and elaborate the draft.

### **4) Consultation with Range States**

Range States will be consulted and the draft SSAP finalized.

### **5) Adoption of SSAP**

How the SSAP might be adopted will be determined in consultation with Range States. The timeframe foreseen would be before or at COP12, depending on the preferences of the Range States.