

**REVIEW OF THE PACIFIC ISLANDS REGIONAL MARINE SPECIES
PROGRAMME FRAMEWORK 2003-2007**
**AN INFORMATION PAPER BY THE INTERNATIONAL FUND FOR
ANIMAL WELFARE (IFAW)**



MARCH 2007

Measures for Marine Mammal Conservation, Protection and Management in the Pacific Islands Region

Introduction

Marine mammals are an important and integral element of Pacific Island cultures, economies and biodiversity. Nevertheless, the population status of many species of marine mammal in the Pacific Island region is largely unknown. As the socio-economic value of marine mammals to the region grows via tourism, so too does the need for long-term conservation and management of marine mammals and their habitats.

Recognising this value, there have been considerable efforts by national governments, the Secretariat for the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP), the Secretariat of the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS), the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), Whales Alive, the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society (WDCS), the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), the South Pacific Whale Research Consortium (SPWRC) and others in the Pacific Islands region to assist in the development of national and regional protection measures for marine mammals. In the last 5 years, for example, over 15 million square kms of the South Pacific Ocean has been declared whale sanctuary as a significant number of Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICTs) establish their Exclusive Economic Zones as protected areas for marine mammals.

Importantly, in recent years, progress has also been made in advancing regional cetacean conservation initiatives. There has been progress in implementing actions identified in the SPREP Whale and Dolphin Action Plan 2003 – 2007 and Dugong Action Plan 2003 – 2007 and the development and agreement of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for the conservation of cetaceans and their habitats under the CMS.

To support these regional and national initiatives and, in particular, to provide technical support to the evaluation and review process of the SPREP Whales and Dolphins and Dugong Action Plans, existing marine mammal conservation measures across the Pacific Islands region were reviewed. This information paper summarises the findings of that review, including specific recommendations of relevance to the review of the SPREP marine mammal action plans.

Summary of main findings

The review found that there has been progress in the establishment of national measures and legislation for the conservation of marine mammals since the introduction of the SPREP marine species action plans in 2003. For example, several PICTs have established national whale sanctuaries and even more nations provide for the protection of marine mammals under existing fisheries or environmental legislation.

However, the review also found that, in some cases, national legislation does not reflect the traditional, cultural, conservation or economic values and importance associated with marine mammals. The review indicated that the protection afforded to marine mammals could be further strengthened in many SPREP member states.

The level of protection afforded to marine mammals and the degree to which specific marine mammal conservation measures have been introduced appears to vary significantly between different PICTs. Nevertheless, the majority of countries and territories do have some legislative basis for the protection of marine species and marine resources. As such, the foundations exist for the conservation of the region's marine mammals.

The review noted that the SPREP marine species action plan review process and the development of MoUs for cetaceans and dugong in the region under the CMS present excellent opportunities to support the work of SPREP member states in conserving marine mammals in the Pacific islands region.

Finally, the review recommended that with additional capacity, technical and financial support, good progress can continue to be made to further the protection and conservation of the marine mammals of the region.

Discussion of findings and recommendations

a) Marine protected areas for marine mammals

Nine out of the twenty one Pacific Island countries and territories reviewed have declared their territorial waters as a national whale sanctuary, while ten countries reviewed have existing 'no take' protection mechanisms for marine mammals, and a further seven countries have protection measures for some marine mammals but not all species. This result is encouraging and indicates the progression of the implementation of SPREP's Whale and Dolphin Action Plan and Dugong Action Plan.

Amongst those countries that have national whale sanctuaries, support is needed to develop and implement management frameworks to support the sanctuary declaration. Lack of capacity appears to be a limiting factor to the implementation of such conservation measures at present.

b) National legislation

Overall, there are some evident gaps in protection measures for marine mammals across the region. Promising opportunities exist however, to increase protection for marine mammals under existing provisions in national fisheries or environmental legislation in many countries.

Fisheries and other ocean resources are the mainstay of Pacific economies. The review found that many countries and territories have thorough national legislation and policy frameworks concerning the use of marine resources, but the protection of marine mammals is often only secondary. There appear to be clear opportunities for increasing national conservation measures for marine mammals in line with regional and international standards by amending and extending existing legislation.

c) Regional agreements

The review identified a wide range of regional and international fisheries, conservation and maritime agreements and conventions that PICTs are party to. These umbrella mechanisms also provide a basis for conservation across the region. Though these initiatives and partnerships have been fruitful, the review found that in-country capacity for full implementation is often limited, for example in relation to addressing the research and management requirements in relation to marine mammals.

d) National Biodiversity Strategy Action Plans (NBSAPs)

Of the NBSAPs in development or already in place it appears that, for most countries, the plans do not specifically include management actions for marine mammals. The review recommends that objectives and actions specifically for marine mammals be included under the 'marine biodiversity' section of NBSAPs.

e) Information to underpin conservation and management measures

There is a significant lack of knowledge and information about the status of marine mammals and the impacts of potential threats to them in the Pacific Islands region. This is in part due to the size and inaccessibility of the area in which they occur. What is known of their abundance and distribution is largely based on coastal sightings and management issues appear often to be addressed on a reactionary basis.

The review recommends that support is provided to collect further information about cetacean abundance and distribution in the region and within the waters of specific countries and territories in order to support the development of appropriate management measures. Until more information is available on the status of marine mammal species and issues affecting their conservation, a precautionary approach to their management is recommended by the review.

In addition to the specific recommendations noted in the discussion of above, the review identified the overarching need to provide increased technical and financial assistance to support marine mammal conservation initiatives by PICTs. Specifically, support is needed to:

- build capacity with managers and community stakeholders in research, monitoring and enforcement techniques;
- establish further information about cetacean abundance and distribution in the region and within the waters of specific countries and territories in order to support the development of appropriate management measures;
- explore alternative mechanisms to enhance the protection of marine mammals at a national level such as inclusion on protected species lists, introduction of additional MPAs, and the establishment of community managed conservation areas;
- establish a database of existing marine mammal protection legislation in the Pacific Islands region including examples and templates of specific management measures (e.g. sanctuary management plans, marine mammal conservation legislation, marine tourism regulations etc.); and
- continue regional co-operation over migratory species conservation measures through continued support for the implementation of the SPREP marine species action plans and the CMS MoU.

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