



Media Release
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Experts gather to save the ocean
The world's first conference on marine protected areas for marine mammals

Maui, Hawaii: The conservation of the world's most iconic ocean species, whales and dolphins, is to take a step forward next week with the launch of the first conference on protected areas for marine mammals.

Over 150 marine experts from 30 countries around the world will gather in Maui, Hawaii, on Monday 30th March to build plans for networks of protected areas, which will conserve vulnerable species and the places on which they depend. Just offshore, humpback whales court and sing in the Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary, which hopes to become part of a network of Marine Protected Areas across the Pacific.

Erich Hoyt from WDCS, the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society, one of the sponsors of the event, said: *'If we truly want to save whales and dolphins, we have to think about saving their habitat, their homes in the sea. We have recently witnessed the extinction of the Yangtze River dolphin, representing the loss of an entire, ancient family of animals, if we want to ensure that we don't suffer a similar loss in the future, we must protect the places and conditions critical to the survival of whales and dolphins and other marine life.'*

The world ocean occupies three times the surface area of the land and, including its great depth, contains the vast majority of Earth's wildlife habitats. Yet the sea has far less protection than the land. Compared to 12% of the land in protected areas and parks only 0.65% of the sea surface has some form of even modest protection, and only 0.08% is highly protected.

WDCS is now calling for 12 large Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) and MPA Networks, to be set aside by law by 2012, for the conservation of whales and dolphins and the habitats important to their survival.

To be effective, MPAs must include highly protected zones, as well as zones for other uses as agreed by stakeholders as part of a regularly reviewed management plan. The best MPAs are part of networks which are particularly important for wide-ranging and migratory animals such as whales and dolphins with their complex habitat requirements.

WDCS's Erich Hoyt continued, *'Most marine areas currently proposed for protection are piecemeal and disconnected. The goal of this conference is to bring together diverse people working in diverse areas of the world and to start to build networks which can truly offer protection for these iconic species and the ecosystems on which they depend.'*

The conference, which includes more than 40 symposium talks, 7 workshops and 10 training sessions, is appropriately held in the Pacific region, which over the past decade has led the world in conservation through MPAs and hosts seven of the eight largest MPAs on Earth.

Notes for Editors

For more information, please contact: Regina Asmutis-Silvia on 508 746 2522 or 508 451 3853.

A virtual "media room" will be found on www.icmmpa.org, featuring daily proceedings, press releases, photos, fact sheets, speaker biographies, web links and contact information for interviews.

The conference will run from the 30th March to the 3rd April in Maui, Hawaii. It is hosted by NOAA (the National Ocean and Atmospheric Administration), the US National Marine Fisheries Service Office of International Affairs, and the Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary. For more information on the conference, see www.icmmpa.org.

The conference has attracted Marine Protected Area managers and designers, cetacean researchers, conservation groups and stakeholders from more than 30 countries.

WDCS is an official sponsor of the conference. WDCS's Erich Hoyt, author of *Marine Protected Areas for Whales, Dolphins and Porpoises*, co-chaired the programme committee and will give the opening keynote speech to the conference.

15 Pacific nations have declared their entire national (EEZ) waters as marine mammal sanctuaries.

Five of the outstanding Pacific MPAs, the largest MPAs on Earth (ranging in size from 246,624 sq km to 410,500 sq km) are each larger than the total land area of Great Britain (244,820 sq km).

Worldwide, there are more than 500 proposed or existing MPAs which feature or include whales or dolphins (Hoyt 2005). However, 40% of these are too small and poorly conceived to offer real protection and most of the others have been slow to set up management plans, enforcement and monitoring – the tools of an effective MPA. MPA networks, if strategically designed, have the potential to improve greatly the effectiveness of individual MPAs.