

WDCS Press Communication

A worldwide web for whales

The special places where whales and dolphins live and the people who know them

Maui, Hawaii, 3rd April 2009: On the final day of the first international conference on marine mammal protected areas, experts addressed future challenges for the management of existing and the establishment of new marine protected area networks. The more than 200 marine mammal scientists, MPA managers and other experts from 40 countries agreed that this gathering on the shores of the Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary was a valuable experience that needs to carry on by building an enduring network.

While humpback whales, often in sight of conference delegates, cavorted offshore on their mating grounds, a key recommendation from the conference came out of a workshop convened by WDCS Research Fellow Erich Hoyt: "A worldwide effort must be made urgently to identify and define whale and dolphin critical habitats and hot spots," said Hoyt. "Then we need to map this information with other species and ecogeographic data to create MPA networks in national waters and on the high seas. It is like creating a sort of worldwide web for whales and dolphins but connecting not just the animals, but the special places where they live, and the people there too."

Conference delegates will bring these and other recommendations to the upcoming meeting of the International Marine Protected Areas Congress (IMPAC 2) in Washington DC, in late May, and they will also form part of the work plan for the IUCN WCPA High Seas MPA Task Force.

"Probably less than 1 percent of the world's marine mammal critical habitat has been identified much less protected," added Hoyt. "We have discussed strategies for cost-effective measures to attack this huge workload with surveys and other studies. Clearly the emphasis will need to be on rare and endangered species, but we also need to protect healthy populations so that they don't join the endangered ranks."

In his conference keynote, Hoyt praised the fine recent record in the high level protection in the Pacific where 10 of the world's largest 15 MPAs are located, including the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park in Australia and the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument, in the Hawaiian Islands, at 362,000 sq km, the largest highly protected area in the world. But he reported that approximately 40% of the 300 existing marine mammal MPAs are clearly too small and even a higher percentage offer no real protection. MPAs in Europe, East Asia, West Africa and the Middle East were particularly small and ineffective even for protecting coastal dolphin habitat, much less that of large whale species. "Networks will solve some of the problems of individual small size if we are clever about what we protect, but much better zoned and well-managed protection is clearly needed."

WDCS is a sponsor of the International Conference on Marine Mammal Protected Areas. WDCS was represented with five experts, two of them Members of the Steering committee and Erich Hoyt as co-chair of the programme committee. Presentations and posters included the announcement of the South American River Dolphin Protected Area Network (SARDPAN), cetacean habitat surveys of the Pacific Islands region and Patagonia, Argentina, an introduction to the proposed MPA in the Ross Sea, Antarctica, and the Adelaide Dolphin Sanctuary, in Australia.

Video clips from an interview conducted by the ICMMPA press team with Erich Hoyt are available on the conference website for download http://www.icmmpa.org/?page_id=516
<http://www.icmmpa.org/?page_id=516>

Graphs about MPAs, as well as "Zoning", a management approach within MPAs, and high quality images of whales and dolphins can be provided upon request.

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