

Dolphins, Porpoises, and Whales: 1994-1998 Action Plan for the Conservation of Cetaceans

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Introduction

The challenge before the Cetacean Specialist Group (CSG), and indeed before most of the IUCN/SSC specialist groups, was well defined by Katona in his discussion of planning for the recovery of humpback whale populations: "... management of the humpback whale or of any endangered species cannot be regarded as a task to complete. While there may be some actions that need to be accomplished only once, for example designating certain locations as sanctuaries for the species, other actions may need to be overseen or repeated forever, or until a decision is taken that the species should not be protected."

It can still be stated that humans have not caused the extinction of any cetacean species. However, this is a tentative and somewhat hollow claim. Surviving wild populations of at least four species (baiji, vaquita, northern right whale, and bhulan) are in the low to mid-hundreds, and in the cases of the baiji and the vaquita, a declining trend is thought to be continuing. Some populations of other species have been exterminated or very greatly depleted, e.g. the Atlantic gray whale (extinct) and the eastern spinner dolphin in the Pacific (reduced to about a third of its population size in the 1950s).

Conservationists and scientists campaigned for many years to bring the direct exploitation of large cetaceans under effective control, largely by changing the policies of the International Whaling Commission (IWC). Right whales and bowheads have been protected from commercial whaling under international law since 1935 (although with some well-known violations), gray whales since 1946, humpbacks and blue whales since the mid-1960s. The worldwide moratorium on commercial whaling, which took effect beginning in 1986, can be seen as the most recent in a long line of protective measures.

There is now reason for cautious optimism about the status and future of certain populations of large whales. For example, right whales in the South Atlantic, humpbacks off Australia, gray whales in the eastern North Pacific, and possibly blue whales in the eastern North Pacific have shown signs of steady recovery under protection. Some stocks, however, such as those of right whales in the North Pacific, bowheads in the North Atlantic, and blue and fin whales in the Southern Ocean, apparently remain dangerously small, and there is no reason to be complacent about their future. The lack of adequate monitoring makes it impossible to investigate trends in these stocks. In the 1980s and early 1990s, direct exploitation has not posed an immediate threat to most endangered whale populations, but accidental mortality in fishing gear, reduction of prey due to competitive harvesting by humans, and pollution have emerged as potential threats that give cause for continuing concern.

There is still much interest in the conservation of the great whales. The high public profile of commercial whaling ensures that governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and inter-governmental organizations (IGOs) will continue to apply pressure on the whaling nations to eliminate whaling altogether or to keep harvests within sustainable limits and protect at least some populations. The CSG membership has always been well represented in the IWC's Scientific Committee as well as in many of the relevant governmental agencies, NGOs, and other IGOs. Many members therefore have been involved directly in the work of developing an effective regime for large-whale conservation.

The first CSG Action Plan deliberately redirected the attentions and energies of conservationists from the commercially exploited great whales to the smaller cetaceans, and the present Action Plan continues the emphasis on river dolphins and coastal populations of marine species. With the possible exception of the northern right whale, these groups encompass the most critically endangered species whose exceptional vulnerability is often tied to a geographically restricted range, a relatively narrow ecological niche, and a dependence on resources that are also used by humans.

The survival of river dolphins depends on the health of major river systems in less developed countries. These dolphins are in direct competition with humans for the necessities of life: food and fresh water. Whether it is to control flooding, support irrigation, or produce electrical power, the impetus for dams, barrages, embankments, and other river modifications grows relentlessly. These structures fragment populations of dolphins and their prey and reduce the amount of suitable habitat available to them. Moreover, the drive toward economic development through industrialization, coupled with rapid growth in human populations, has meant that rivers must absorb ever-increasing amounts of waste products, while at the same time they are expected to produce larger and larger quantities of fish, crustaceans, and mollusks for human consumption. Although river dolphins in many areas enjoy religious, customary, or legal protection from hunting, they face many threats, for example from accidental fouling in fishing nets and hooks, collisions with powered vessels, underwater detonations, and polluted or diminished food supplies. In some areas, directed takes (i.e. those where the cetacean was the fisherman's or hunter's intended target) continue to occur, and there is a demand for river-dolphin products such as meat, oil, and reproductive organs.

Coastal small cetaceans are also perceived as competing with humans for certain resources, often with no direct evidence to support such perceptions. Some populations have experienced high rates of mortality due to accidental entanglement in fishing gear, and in areas such as Peru, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines, the bycatch has given rise to a directed catch as fishermen have become more aware of markets for cetacean meat, blubber, and organs. Culling operations, inspired by the perception that depredations by small cetaceans are responsible for local declines in fish harvests, continued at least until 1991 in Japan and may continue in the Philippines and Turkey.

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