



UNION INTERNATIONALE POUR LA CONSERVATION DE LA NATURE ET DE SES RESSOURCES
INTERNATIONAL UNION FOR THE CONSERVATION OF NATURE AND NATURAL RESOURCES

CETACEAN SPECIALIST GROUP

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Dear Sirs:

Capture and export of dolphins in the Solomon Islands: 2003 and 2007

In July 2003, the IUCN/SSC Cetacean Specialist Group (CSG) became aware of and expressed concerned about a large-scale live-capture-for-export of dolphins in the Solomon Islands. At the invitation of Nelson K. Kile, then Minister for Fisheries and Marine Resources, and Moses Biliki, then Director of Environment, Ministry of Environment, a small team of cetacean experts visited the Solomon Islands between 9-12 September 2003 on behalf of the Cetacean Specialist Group (CSG) and Veterinary Specialist Group (VSG) of IUCN. The CSG/VSG team visited dolphin holding pens in Honiara and Gavutu and met with staff of the Solomon Islands Marine Mammal Education Centre (SIMMEC), which oversaw the capture, holding and subsequent export of dolphins.

The vulnerability of local island dolphin populations means that accurate information on the numbers taken, and on the locations of the hunts, is essential for management. The CSG/VSG team identified the majority of the 41 dolphins it observed in holding pens as Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphins, *Tursiops aduncus*, which are coastal in most of their range. At the time, no information on the locality of the hunts was provided, information was scant on the numbers taken (up to 100), and no abundance estimates for cetaceans in the Solomon Islands existed.

Based on the observations of the CSG/VSG team, and a fruitless search for relevant literature on cetaceans in the Solomon Islands, we concluded, "*No scientific assessment of the population-level effects of the removals of bottlenose dolphins in the Solomon Islands was undertaken in advance of the recent live-capture operations.*"

Accordingly, we advised, "*Without any reliable data on numbers and population structure of bottlenose dolphins in this region, it is impossible to make a credible judgment about the impacts of this level of exploitation.*"

As you know, bottlenose dolphins are listed in Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), which places them among species that "although not necessarily now threatened with extinction, may become so unless trade in specimens ... is subject to strict

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regulation....” Although the Solomon Islands were not a Party to CITES in 2003, exports of dolphins to countries that were Parties meant that the transactions had to “substantially conform” to CITES requirements, including the need for a “non-detriment finding” (Article IV). Based on the lack of data at the time, we concluded that:

“Until such data are available, a non-detriment finding necessary under CITES Article IV is not possible. Therefore CITES Parties should not issue permits to import dolphins from the Solomon Islands. Unfortunately, this episode of live-capture was undertaken with little or no serious investment in assessing the conservation implications for the affected dolphin population(s).”

Twenty-eight of the dolphins were exported later in 2003 to Mexico. No further exports are known to have taken place and we are not aware of the fate of the remaining dolphins. However, as you know, the government of the Solomon Islands adopted legislation in 2005 banning further exports of dolphins.

We were pleased to learn earlier this year of two indications of your administration’s commitment to the conservation of cetaceans. First, in March 2007 the Solomon Islands signed the Memorandum of Understanding for the Conservation of Cetaceans and their Habitats in the Pacific Islands Region under the Convention for the Conservation of Migratory Species. Through this MOU and its Action Plan, the Solomon Islands agrees to cooperate and reinforce efforts to conserve all cetaceans that occur in the Pacific Islands Region, reduce threats, compile and exchange information and undertake more training, research and monitoring. Later the same month, the Solomon Islands signed CITES, which will enter into force on 24 June 2007, committing your country to ensuring that international trade of wildlife is both sustainable and well-regulated.

In light of these significant commitments to conservation by your government, we are concerned to learn from recent press reports that up to 20 more dolphins (species unknown) have been live-captured in the Solomon Islands and may be exported. We are not aware that any credible, peer-reviewed studies of bottlenose dolphins have been undertaken in the Solomon Islands since 2003 that would lead us to change the conclusion we reached at that time, i.e. that a non-detriment finding under CITES is not possible for these populations at present and that exports therefore should not take place. We are well aware of the Rapid Ecological Assessment work carried out in the Solomons in 2004 under the leadership of Benjamin Kahn, a Cetacean Specialist Group member. As indicated in his report, the results of that work were by no means sufficient or appropriate to serve as the basis for a non-detriment finding in support of bottlenose dolphin exports.

Signed:



Randall Reeves (IUCN Cetacean Specialist Group, Chair)



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