



Indian Ocean Whale and Dolphin Meeting Celebrates 30th Anniversary of the Indian Ocean Whale Sanctuary

Marine experts call for action to sustain the Indian Ocean whaling ban and protect dolphins from growing slaughter

Leading marine scientists and conservationists from over twenty countries met in July to present the findings of whale and dolphin research and conservation projects from across the Indian Ocean region. Their studies and talks included species ranging from the largest animal on Earth, the Blue whale, to a dwarf species of dolphin. One thing most species had in common was their urgent need for protection.

The conference, hosted by the Maldives Government's Marine Research Centre and sponsored in part by the Save Our Seas Foundation (SOSF), was held to mark the 30th Anniversary of the establishment of the Indian Ocean Sanctuary by the International Whaling Commission. The Indian Ocean Sanctuary is a region in which no commercial catching of whales is permitted. Vital for maintaining whale populations, sanctuaries give whales the opportunity to recover from whaling exploitation.

Dr. Rupert Ormond, the chief scientists for the Save Our Seas Foundation said, "It was exciting to discover that so much is being done by young research teams in different countries of the Indian Ocean region. The results of the meeting will do much to secure the future of the crucial Indian Ocean Whale Sanctuary. Despite the ban on whaling, however, populations of both whales and dolphins appear to be on the decline, mainly because of accidental entrapment in fishing gear and in some cases, intentional hunting."

Learning about the ecology and habits of marine species is imperative for their survival, as only through knowledge can effective conservation and management plans be recognized. Recent studies using advanced research techniques such as DNA sequencing and the attachment of satellite-linked tags to individual whales reveal how distinct populations migrate between key feeding and breeding areas. In some cases these movement patterns were contained entirely within the northern Indian Ocean. Other studies discussed previously unknown populations of smaller cetaceans (whales and dolphins), such as humpback and spinner dolphin. In many cases these populations were found to be threatened because of accidental capture in fishing gear and an increase in use either as human food, or as bait in shark-fishing. The scientists also noted a growth in whale and dolphin watching in the Indian Ocean, which is providing increased employment in countries ranging from the Maldives to Oman, and Tanzania to Sri Lanka.

"It has been truly exciting to learn at this meeting how many new discoveries have been made concerning different species of whales and dolphins in so many parts of the Indian Ocean. Unfortunately, one of those discoveries has been that because they are keystone apex predators some of these species, such as Sperm Whale, are concentrating so many toxic pesticides and metals that they are not only dangerous for humans to consume, but likely to become poisoned as these chemicals accumulate," said Dr. Roger Payne, a well-known marine biologist.

A Declaration expressing great concern about the declining health of the Indian Ocean environment in general and more particularly at the continuing threats to the region's whales and dolphins was agreed upon by all delegates. They also urged the International Whaling Commission to sustain the Indian Ocean Sanctuary, and to initiate collaboration with other parties to bring a halt to the growing slaughter of dolphins in the region's coastal waters.

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