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Press Release

Gathering of Marine Mammal Experts Recommend One Plan Approach for Conservation Stewardship of Small Cetaceans Group Identifies Need to Prepare for the Worst while They Work for the Best

A diverse group of biologists, veterinarians and population managers met this last week to discuss if, when and how to include ex-situ options for addressing significant challenges to the conservation of dolphins and porpoises. Thirty-seven experts from 14 countries met for three days of intense work to review the situations that led to the extinction crisis for the Yangtze river dolphin (aka baiji) in China and vaquita porpoise in Mexico, with the goal of ensuring that all potential conservation options are available for other dolphins and porpoises facing the risk of extinction. The group is preparing a detailed report but have identified the importance of using the IUCN One Plan Approach that includes integrating ex-situ options with wild management strategies.

"The concept of the [One Plan Approach](#), developed by IUCN's Conservation Planning Specialist Group (CPSG), represents a continuum of management between ex situ and wild environments. Ex situ conservation is a gradient of activities, addressing many situations of human intervention, stewardship and managed care" said Dr Phil Miller, Senior Program Officer with CPSG.

The workshop began with first-hand accounts of the tragedies that occurred as conservationists tried to save the vaquita and the baiji and were then inspired as the discussion turned towards sharing the success that has been accomplished in conserving the Yangtze finless porpoise.



“The vaquita population plummeted in the last six years due to bycatch with legal and illegal gill nets despite years of work to stop this practice. Unfortunately our decision to bring the vaquita into a protected situation in its natural habitat came when the species was already at the brink of extinction. We were too late to learn how to care for these animals and not having this ex situ option may be critical to saving this species” said Dr. Lorenzo Rojas-Bracho CONABIO, National Commission for Biodiversity. “The situation with the Yangtze finless porpoise is an example of how people came together to stave off extinction by working through an integrated conservation plan. This plan has been successful because it includes both work to recover the species in the wild and managed human support of the species in separated sections of the Yangtze river.”

The group then listened to reports from experts that have been working in the field with seven species of coastal and riverine dolphins, that have been assessed as vulnerable (VU), endangered (EN) and critically endangered (CR) by cetacean specialists with the IUCN. These species, including three from South America (Amazon River dolphin/Boto (*Inia geoffrensis*), Franciscana (*Pontoporia blainvillei*) and Tucuxi (*Sotalia fluviatilis*)), two from coastal Africa (Atlantic humpback dolphin (*Sousa teuszii*) and Indian Ocean humpback dolphin (*Sousa plumbea*)) and two from Asia (South Asian river dolphin/Susu (*Platanista gangetica*) and Irrawaddy dolphin (*Orcaella brevirostris*)).

“We know these species are declining from dying in gillnets and that for small populations emergency collapses, like we recently experienced with vaquitas, will happen.” Said Barbara Taylor Ph.D., a member of the workshop steering committee and genetics program leader for National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association Fisheries. “We want to be ready to take care of any of these species by being hopeful and working for the best outcome but being prepared for the worst. We want to have the emergency room ready and know how to care for the patients.”

The workshop agreed that certain tasks could immediately be identified as potentially helpful towards the development of integrated in situ / ex situ action plans for conservation of several species being considered, such as developing mechanisms for increasing the knowledge base about these species and developing



tested protocols that allow for emergency capture and release of all seven focal species if needed in emergency situations.

“It is important to understand that ex-situ management techniques that are applied to species conservation management include but are not limited to translocation, rehabilitation, supportive management in habitat, modified habitats and zoo and aquarium management. We support and endorse the individuals and organizations who are stewards for these species that have been working to conserve these species in situ, we value the information they can share and believe that a One Plan conservation approach will strengthen efforts to conserve these species” said Dr Randy Wells, Senior Conservation Scientist with the Chicago Zoological Society.

Details of any recommended species action plans will be included in the published report from the workshop.

Workshop participants represent varied interests and experience including; IUCN-SSC Cetacean Specialist Group members, scientists working with the focal species in their natural habitat, international zoological associations including WAZA, AZA and EAZA, population biologists with the IUCN/CPSG, and marine mammal veterinarians with wide-ranging experience working with cetaceans in zoo/aquarium settings and their natural environment.

The workshop was hosted by Zoo Nuremberg, the National Marine Mammal Foundation (San Diego) and YAQU PACHA e.V. - Organization for the Conservation of South American Aquatic Mammals. Ocean Park Corporation (Hong Kong), YAQU PACHA and Zoo Nuremberg have provided funding for the realization of the WS, and members of the IUCN SSC Cetacean Specialist Group will contribute with scientific and technical support.

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