

Editorial

Welcome to this the supplement to the twenty-second volume of the *Journal of Cetacean Research and Management*.

This supplement to the Journal contains the Report of the Scientific Committee from its Annual Meeting held from 11-26 May 2020. SC68B was unlike any previous IWC Scientific Committee meeting as the COVID-19 pandemic forced the cancellation of international travel and in-person gatherings worldwide. For the first time, the Committee needed to progress key items through virtual sessions and email. Consequently, at very short notice, a revised agenda was drawn up to reflect priority issues that could be dealt with virtually. Plenary sessions were replaced with information distributed by email and sub-committee sessions were used to draft work plans and budget proposals for 2021.

To deal with the wide range of time zones occupied by Committee members, virtual sessions were restricted to just two hours (14:30 to 16:30 GMT+1) a day although this narrow window still imposed early morning or late night work schedules on some participants. Up to three concurrent daily sessions were possible during the two-hour time slot providing a total of 39 virtual sessions, a substantial reduction from the usual 110 sessions available during a typical in-person meeting. This decreased availability for meeting time was reflected in a greatly reduced SC68B agenda. However, the virtual nature of the meeting did also provide opportunities, particularly in terms of participation. A record 350 people attended the meeting with 25% attending for the first time.

With no dedicated plenary sessions the report adoption had to be completed online using shared documents and a meeting of the Heads of Delegation. Nevertheless, the full Committee was provided opportunity to comment on all sections of the draft report. As a result of these challenges the report from the SC68B meeting has a different layout from previous years. Summaries of the sub-group discussions and their recommendations have been combined into the main report text rather than the usual annexes.

SC68B was one the first major international meetings of its kind to be forced into a fully virtual format with very limited time for planning. Despite this, the use of online conferencing software and a positive attitude by all involved meant the meeting managed to deal with a significant proportion of its usual agenda, although some of the more controversial and technical discussions had to be postponed. Lessons learnt during the meeting, and from subsequent feedback by participants, have been used to plan further online meetings by the IWC and advise other IGOs.

The COVID-19 pandemic also presented a number of challenges for ongoing scientific research with many fieldwork projects affected. A particular concern were the many long-term monitoring and research programmes that underpin much of the Committee's work. In contrast, changes in human activity provided many benefits for cetaceans such as reduced ship traffic and underwater noise. These benefits were most obviously demonstrated by observations of species in areas they have previously been excluded indicating at their potential resilience. It is hoped that such information, gathered as a result of this unwelcome but essential global shutdown, may provide scientists with insights into how cetaceans might respond to rapid environmental changes in the future.

Iain Staniland

Editor

Cambridge, 17 March 2021

Cover images

Images 1, 4, 6, 7, 9 and 10: Taken from the IWC Photo-ID Catalogue

Image 2: Penelope Tandy, 'Whale of the Week' competition

Image 3: Jude Stringer, 'Whale of the Week' competition

Images 4 and 8: Taken from the Scientific Committee Report

