

Summary Report of the Third International Conference on Marine Mammal Protected Areas (ICMMPA 3), Adelaide, Australia, 9-11 November 2014*

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ABSTRACT

More than 100 marine mammal protected area (MMPA) researchers, managers as well as government and conservation group representatives from 20 countries convened in Adelaide, South Australia, from 9-11 November 2014 for the Third International Conference on Marine Mammal Protected Areas (ICMMPA3). The two main goals were (1) to highlight the importance of place and size for protected areas that feature or include marine mammals, and (2) to explore the use of a new tool for conservation — the important marine mammal area, or IMMA, designation — which the IUCN Marine Mammal Protected Areas Task Force has been developing. The conference theme “Important Marine Mammal Areas - A Sense of Place, a Question of Size” was explored in panels and workshops. Many large new MPAs designated by Pacific nations as well as the US, UK and France have come on stream in the last few years. They are presenting new challenges for management. The conference also wanted to revisit the smaller areas and how they can help marine mammal conservation. But the spotlight was on IMMAs. Modeled after the successful conservation tool of Important Bird Areas (IBAs), IMMAs are defined as “discrete portions of habitat, important to one or more marine mammal species, which have the potential to be delineated and managed for conservation.” Thus, IMMAs are not in themselves MMPAs and neither are MMPAs de facto IMMAs. Rather, the IMMA is a scientific tool that has the potential to lead to place-based conservation. The policy response could be designation of one of a range of space-based tools, including MMPAs and MMPA networks, marine spatial planning (MSP), and marine traffic directives through the International Maritime Organisation (IMO). Other potential policy responses could be to check how existing MMPAs or zoning designations correspond to the IMMAs selected, or to make a decision simply to monitor a given area over time. IMMA criteria, to be finalized in 2015, are aiming to be consistent with CBD’s ecologically or biologically significant areas (EBSAs), IUCN key biodiversity areas (KBAs), and biologically important areas (BIAs) identified in Australia and the US.

Several panels and workshops produced valuable discussions about IMMAs. These led to insights into the current thinking about how IMMAs could be useful and desirable tools for global marine mammal conservation. Secondly, the discussions provided specific recommendations for the IMMA initiative of the Marine Mammal Protected Areas Task Force of which the three below are highlighted:

1. The Task Force should establish a secretariat to oversee the IMMA development, delivery and implementation. This includes building of networks and management of expert working groups.
2. The Task Force should set up a community-wide consultation on the IMMA criteria to assist with their finalization and overall credibility of use.
3. The Task Force should prepare an IMMA Toolkit detailing methods to be used in IMMA identification and assessment of available data types, with examples from data-rich and data-poor areas.

The ICMMPA conferences will continue every 2-4 years, with a proposed ICMMPA4 in México in late 2016 or 2017.

INTRODUCTION

More than 100 marine mammal protected area (MMPA) researchers, managers as well as government and conservation group representatives from 20 countries convened in Adelaide, South Australia, from 9-11 November 2014 for the Third International Conference on Marine Mammal Protected Areas (ICMMPA3). The two main goals were (1) to highlight the importance of place and size for protected areas that feature or include marine mammals, and (2) to explore the use of a new tool for conservation — the important marine mammal area, or IMMA, designation — which the IUCN Marine Mammal Protected Areas Task Force has been developing.

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* Full text of the proceedings for ICMMPA 3 will be available by July 2015 at <http://icmmpa.org>

management. The conference also wanted to revisit the smaller areas and how they can help marine mammal conservation. But the spotlight was on IMMAs. Modeled after the successful conservation tool of Important Bird Areas (IBAs), IMMAs are defined as “discrete portions of habitat, important to one or more marine mammal species, which have the potential to be delineated and managed for conservation.” Thus, IMMAs are not in themselves MMPAs and neither are MMPAs de facto IMMAs. Rather, the IMMA is a scientific tool that has the potential to lead to place-based conservation. The policy response could be designation of one of a range of space-based tools, including MMPAs and MMPA networks, marine spatial planning (MSP), and marine traffic directives through the International Maritime Organisation (IMO). Other potential policy responses could be to check how existing MMPAs or zoning designations correspond to the IMMAs selected, or to make a decision simply to monitor a given area over time. IMMA criteria, to be finalized in 2015, are aiming to be consistent with CBD’s ecologically or biologically significant areas (EBSAs), IUCN key biodiversity areas (KBAs), and biologically important areas (BIAs) identified in Australia and the US.

The conference was co-hosted by Whale and Dolphin Conservation (WDC) Australasia and the governments of Australia and South Australia. In various talks and workshops, participants were introduced to the small but effective local Adelaide Dolphin Sanctuary as well as on the final evening with a WDC-sponsored dinner cruise through the sanctuary. Other organizations helping to sponsor the conference included the French MPA Agency, the IUCN Marine Mammal Protected Areas Task Force, the U.S. Marine Mammal Commission, the Eulabor Institute, International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP), and the government of México.

During the conference, the French Marine Protected Agency announced a joint agreement for networking between the Agoa Sanctuary in the French Caribbean and the Saguenay–St. Lawrence Marine Park in Québec, Canada. Some humpbacks make the journey between the two parks every year. On the final day, the conference applauded the declaration of Bangladesh’s first offshore marine protected area to safeguard Bryde’s whales, tropical dolphins, sea turtles, and sharks in the Swatch-of-No-Ground. The ICMMPA has promoted the sister sanctuary concept as a network initiative and has been supportive of the Bangladesh MMPA network’s extension to offshore waters.

EMERGING IDEAS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Key Ideas and Recommendations that emerged from ICMMPA3 followed mainly from workshop discussions on the various topics.

- There was considerable debate about marine spatial planning (MSP), which is being adopted by many countries to plan future use of the ocean. Given the lack of robust and consistent data on marine mammal distribution and densities – let alone ecological requirements – it was agreed that MSP initiatives ought to focus on identifying areas of potentially high threat to marine mammals, and to use those hotspots to guide further, improved modeling, along with real data acquisition from marine mammal surveys and applied research. In this way, MSP can help marine mammal conservation by prioritizing where intense research needs to be done, in order to acquire the kind of science needed to guide MSP in such a way that it benefits marine mammals. MSP is an iterative process, so applied and focused marine mammal research can and should be made available to planners and those practicing adaptive management, to fine-tune marine plans and adjust MPA borders and regulations over time. Yet there is some urgency – and innovative ways of collecting data are urgently needed. The MSP workshop stressed the objective to use MSP to avoid marine mammal decline that might occur from uncontrolled activities creating a sea of degradation in which MMPA islands of protection sit.
- The conference included participants from Pacific islands, many of which have relatively small human populations with extraordinarily large marine EEZs. With both a panel and workshop focusing on the Pacific islands region, as well as regional input in most sessions, participants recognized that community groups can play a vital role in establishing MMPAs, both by raising public awareness and by influencing governments. However, capacity building is vital for community groups in Pacific Island countries seeking to learn more about their marine mammals and to improve the protection available to them. It was recommended that NGOs, universities and other institutions, along with marine mammal biologists and regional and government agencies, can provide valuable assistance to community groups in the establishment and management of MMPAs in the Pacific Islands.

- The workshops also provided a valuable forum to exchange ideas between whale watching tour operators and researchers, managers of both large and small MMPAs, including small MMPAs along heavily developed coastlines, as well as spinner dolphin researchers involved in protected areas around the world. Ideas emerging were the need to quantify threats and identify allies, as well as being clear about the objectives and the limitations of MMPAs, particularly in heavily degraded habitats.
- Almost every keynote, panel and workshop talk and subsequent discussion focused on the need for ICMMPA and conference delegates to engage stakeholders in MMPAs and to keep them engaged. MMPAs can provide a valuable sense of ownership and without that it is difficult to make things work. With the prospect of work on the IMMAs, too, although the selection of such areas is seen as a scientific process, gaining acceptance and traction for IMMAs in terms of using them as tools for conservation will depend upon the engagement of stakeholders. The Citizen Science workshop went even deeper into this issue, coming up with ideas to train and nurture more citizen scientists who would be at the leading end of stakeholder groups.
- The education and interpretation workshop also stressed the need to connect people with the ocean — not just the nearshore waters but offshore waters and the great expanse of the high seas. It is envisaged that this would involve a process of reaching out to stakeholders who now use the high seas, including cruise and container ships, fishing boats and others, which could become “vessels of opportunity” to obtain data, create educational engagement as well as using technology to “reach out” to the high seas and bring it into interpretive centers, living rooms and the hearts and minds of people. As the high seas are being mapped for IMMAs and explored as possible MMPAs, this role of connecting the public will be essential.
- Several panels and workshops produced valuable discussions about IMMAs. These led to insights into the current thinking about how IMMAs could be useful and desirable tools for global marine mammal conservation. Secondly, the discussions provided specific recommendations for the IMMA initiative of the Marine Mammal Protected Areas Task Force of which the three below are highlighted:
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The ICMMPA conferences will continue every 2-4 years, with a proposed ICMMPA4 in México in late 2016 or 2017. ICMMPA4 will be sponsored by the Government of México’s National Commission of Natural Protected Areas (CONANP). Behind the scenes the International Committee for Marine Mammal Protected Areas plans to work with the IUCN Marine Mammal Protected Areas Task Force to help plan and implement the important marine mammal areas (IMMAs) concept. In addition, the Committee will continue to help address the needs expressed in the recommendations and to promote better networking and problem solving through the growing constituency developed from the first three conferences and in the plans for the next conference.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

ICMMPA3 has built on the momentum of previous conferences, extending the scientific basis for place-based marine mammal conservation. Central to all plenaries was the question: “Are we using MMPAs to their maximum potential?” Related are the questions: “How can MMPAs be best designed, in terms of location, size, scope of management, shape?” “How can we think systematically about networks of MMPAs, or linked MMPAs?” And finally, “Can we do anything beyond MMPAs to enhance conservation of marine mammals, including by designating additional MPAs, working through MSP, embracing and expanding the IMMA tool, or through awareness-raising?”

A recurring point made in many of the sessions was the fact that the marine mammal community, and marine mammals themselves, will be well-served by greater awareness of the changing policy landscape, including international efforts to identify important areas (EBSAs, IBAs, and now IMMAs),

negotiations to protect the high seas or to manage activities therein, and the burgeoning MSP and ocean zoning happening all around the world.

But we in the ICMMPA community are also asking: “What constrains us from doing better?” The answers which emerged in the panel talks and workshops include lack of political will, lack of resources to plan and manage, lack of standardized scientific information (or lack of information altogether), and lack of agreement on how to move forward. ICMMPA has been instrumental in diminishing the latter constraint, as we have achieved consensus among more and more of the scientific and management community on the utility of MPAs and the new tool of IMMPAs.

The ICMMPA community has come a long way since ICMMPA1 in Maui. Lessons have been learned, and the body of knowledge has grown immensely. There has been much agreement on terms, approaches, tools and the overall importance of spatial management for marine mammal conservation, and we’ve evolved a common agenda. We’ve agreed on the need to move forward in establishing MPAs, and improve management in existing MPAs, even in data-poor areas. We realize we need to better engage stakeholders, and undertake more training. We need to make information (scientific, citizen science-based, and user information) more accessible to planners, and share the widening knowledge base with the broader public. Finally, we need to find ways to reconcile the myriad and dispersed threats to wide-ranging marine mammals with the fact that the most effective marine management is most often local in nature. If we are able to achieve these things, we will be using MPAs to their maximum potential, presenting a powerful tool for conserving endangered marine mammals across the globe.