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The Arabian Sea Whale Network: A brief progress report

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INTERNATIONAL
WHALING COMMISSION

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Background

The Arabian Sea Whale Network Network (ASWN) represents an informal collaboration of researchers and conservation bodies interested in the conservation of whale populations throughout the Northern Indian Ocean. Formed at the conclusion of a January 2015 workshop in Dubai, it does not have formal legal status or governmental recognition. A [website](#) and a logo create a sense of unified purpose and facilitate communication, fund-raising, collaborative research and data management and analysis. [Members](#) include independent researchers and consultants, researchers linked with academic institutions, and representatives of local, national and international NGOs, IGOs and government bodies. More information and background on the network are available through the website, [2015 inaugural workshop report](#), and other documents submitted to this and [past meetings](#) (see below).

Contributions to the SC from Arabian Sea Range States

The ASWN submitted a brief progress report to the 2017 IWC Scientific Committee (SC_67A_CMP_07_rev1), and ASWN members submitted a range of papers to the CMP and other subcommittees. These contributions demonstrated considerable progress in data collection and capacity building in relation to whale research and conservation throughout the Arabian Sea. This year, in addition to this progress report, the ASWN has submitted a full report of a workshop held in January 2018 in Oman as a ‘for information’ document (SC/67B/INFO/07). The workshop report includes research updates from several Arabian Sea range states, a detailed description of the ASWN regional data platform that is being developed with Wild Me/Flukebook, and a discussion of the challenges and opportunities faced by many ASWN member countries with regards to collection of data relevant to whale conservation and fisheries. In addition to this update and the workshop report, several documents are being submitted to the meeting by ASWN members and their colleagues. They include:

Document Number	Lead Author or ASWN representative in author list	Title
Oman		
SC/67B/CMP/13	Andrew Willson et al.	Oman whale research progress update
SC/67B/CMP/19	Cerchio et al.	Geographic variation in song indicates both isolation of Arabian Sea humpback whales and presence of Southern Hemisphere whales off Oman
SC_67b_CMPWP_XX	Collins et al.	Updated mark-recapture abundance estimates for humpback whales off the coast of Oman
Pakistan		
SC_67b_CMPWP_XX	Moazzam Khan and Nawaz	Large whale sightings reported by WWF Pakistan’s crew-based observers in the 2017/18 fishing season
India		
SC/67B/CMP/15	Dipani Sutaria	Baleen whales reports from the Eastern Arabian Sea
SC_67b_ForInfoXXX	Shyam Kumar Madhusudhana, Bishwajit Chakraborty & G. Latha	Humpback whale singing activity off the Goan coast in the Eastern Arabian Sea
Sri Lanka		
SC/67B/INFO/XX	Asha de Vos, Cassandra E. Faux, James Marthick, Joanne Dickinson, and Simon N. Jarman	New Determination of Prey and Parasite Species for Northern Indian Ocean Blue Whales Front. Mar. Sci., 06 April 2018 https://doi.org/10.3389/fmars.2018.00104
Regional		
SC/67B/INFO/13	Jeremy Kiszka et al.	Cetacean bycatch in the western Indian Ocean: a review of available information on coastal gillnet, tuna purse seine and pelagic longline fisheries (IOTC document IOTC 2017 WPEB13 40 Rev1)

SC/67B/INFO/12	Temple et al.	Marine megafauna interactions with small-scale fisheries in the southwestern Indian Ocean: a review of status and challenges for research and management
SC/67B/INFO/07	Minton et al.	Workshop Report: Managing data for whale conservation in the Arabian Sea: A practical introduction to the ASWN Flukebook online data platform. Muscat, Oman 21-23 January 2018
SC/67B/INFO/06	N/A	Proposal for a CMS Concerted Action for Arabian Sea Humpback Whales (<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>) within the existing global concerted action for the species UNEP/CMS/COPI2/Doc.26.2.4
SC/67B/PH/03	Drew Blount, Jason Holmberg, Gianna Minton	Flukebook – A tool for cetacean photo identification, data archiving and automated fluke matching

The number of reports from Arabian Sea range states presented to this meeting, along with the breadth of topics and the number of range states represented in the content and authorship of these reports demonstrates further progress toward increased awareness, data collection and capacity building in the region. This is credit to the efforts of various groups and individuals within the region, whom ASWN continues to help promote as well as providing an active means for collaboration between members.

ASWN progress at regional level

In addition to the progress made by ASWN members and their colleagues in individual Arabian Sea range states, the network is making some progress at the regional level. Research work conducted in Oman which resulted in tracking a satellite tagged female humpback whale from the coast of Oman to the southern tip of India and back again (see SC_67B_CMP13) provided evidence for many network members and their relevant supporting governmental and non-governmental organisations that a regional collaborative approach is required to effectively manage and protect this endangered population. For several weeks in late December 2017/Early January 2018, ASWN members and a widening network of colleagues in Oman, India and Sri Lanka were in constant communication, following the whale's progress day-by-day, mobilizing teams to search for the whale as she entered into their study areas, and exchanging information about oceanographic conditions and threats in the waters through which the whale crossed.

Significant **developments** in the past year (further to the progress report submitted in 2017 - SC_67A_CMP_07_rev1) include:

- The maintenance and regular updating of a membership database, with an email distribution list, which is used for regular exchanges between members of the network.
- The maintenance and regular updating of a website (<https://arabianseawhalenetwork.org/>), which is receiving increasing levels of visitor traffic from around the world.
- The completion of the first phase of design and implementation of a regional online data platform in collaboration with Wild Me (<http://www.wildme.org/>) and Flukebook (Flukebook.org). See Appendix 1 to this report and SC_67b_PH03 for more detail.
- The drafting of a detailed proposal for Concerted Action for Arabian Sea humpback whales under the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS), which was passed with wide support from Arabian Sea range states at the CMS COP in October 2017. It is hoped that this Concerted Action can be implemented in conjunction with an IWC Conservation Management Plan (CMP) if progress is made on the latter.
- The facilitation of a four-day workshop on the implementation of the regional data platform. The workshop included participation from Oman government bodies, research updates from various Arabian Sea range states, an introduction to, and evaluation of the new regional data platform, and

discussion of the challenges and opportunities faced by members wishing to engage with fisheries for data collection and whale conservation efforts (see SC67b_ForInfo_07 for more detail).

- Improved reporting of incidental sightings of humpback whales throughout the Arabian Sea through social media and other means – such as the reporting of the [sighting of a humpback whale mother and calf in the Persian/Arabian Gulf](#) in October 2017, and an entangled whale offshore from Oman in November 2017. This is a result of significant awareness raising efforts by network members.
- The declaration of two marine protected areas in Pakistan, in which the protection of Arabian Sea humpback whales played a significant role (see news items on the ASWN website for the declaration of the [Astola Island MPA](#) and the [Indus Canyon MPA](#)). These declarations were the result of research, awareness raising and lobbying by WWF Pakistan and other conservation bodies.
- Increased [media attention](#) for Arabian Sea humpback whales in response to the crossing of a tagged whale from the Sultanate of Oman to the southern tip of India and back again. The whale was tagged during a survey conducted under the auspices of the Environment Society of Oman, and followed with great interest by the whole network, including research teams in India, that were mobilized to search for the whale and collect data in the coastal areas that the whale visited.

Challenges for ASWN and its members in the coming months and year include:

- Translating the CMP Concerted Action into concrete, government supported conservation measures in Arabian Sea humpback whale range states.
- Identifying a funding mechanism to support coordination of the network and regional-level conservation efforts, as the funding provided by Emirates Wildlife Society-WWF and WWF Pakistan for the first two years of ASWN coordination has run out.
- Continued capacity building for local cetacean scientists throughout the region to facilitate more dedicated cetacean surveys in suspected areas of humpback whale distribution and improve data collection and threat assessments.

Appendix 1: progress update on SH3B, an IWC funded project titled:

CREATION OF A REGIONAL DATA ARCHIVAL AND ANALYSIS TOOL FOR CONSERVATION OF ARABIAN SEA WHALE POPULATIONS

During SC66b, the SH subcommittee agreed to fund project SH3B, the “creation of a regional data archival and analysis tool for conservation of Arabian Sea whale populations”. This funding proposal was formally approved during the Commission meeting in October 2016, and, following slight modifications to the original proposal and approval by the SH chair, a contract was signed between the IWC and the Emirates Wildlife Society –WWF in February 2017. The project has proceeded in line with the projected timeline (see Table 2 below). As of April 2018, the following activities/milestones have been completed:

- The data platform has been designed according to the ToR specified by the Arabian Sea Whale Network, and sightings data has been uploaded from the Indian Marine Mammal network, as well as from Oman. Humpback whale photo-identification data has been uploaded from Oman, as well as a few incidental photos from Pakistan and India.
- A workshop was held in January 2018 to introduce the data platform to the first wave of ASWN members who have agreed to upload their sightings and photo-identification data to the platform.
- A number of improvements and further refinements are being made to the platform in response to feedback gathered during the January workshop..

A full description of the functionality of the new data platform can be found in SC_67b_PH03. Details of financial contributions and spending are provided below in Table 1.

Table 1: Contributions from different organisations to Arabian Sea regional online data platform development

Name of Organisation	Aspects funded	Contributions to project (USD)	Received and paid out to date:
IWC	General data platform development	\$12,000.00 (10,000 GBP)	7,500 GBP received by EWS-WWF and paid to Flukebook under first invoice, remainder of 2,500 will be used for final Flukebook invoice upon project completion.
WWF International	General data platform development	\$4,000.00	Received and reserved for final payment to Flukebook
WWF Pakistan	Coordination of data platform project and ASWN network and data platform ability to incorporate incidental/opportunistic data	\$14,000.00	Approx.\$ 12,000 paid for ASWN coordination from Dec 2017-Dec 2018 (includes high taxes on consultancy fees paid to Pakistan gov't . \$2000 Reserved for import of WWF Pakistan observer data into Flukebook when it is available
Environment Society Oman	Import of Oman dataset	\$1,000.00	Received and reserved for final payment to Flukebook
EWS-WWF UAE	Administration and support	\$2,062.00	Received and used to support admin of project
Total		\$33,062.00	

Table 2: Agreed timeline for implementation of Arabian Sea regional online data platform development – milestones still to be achieved indicated in Red.

Action	Date for completion
Database map and complete list of desired data fields, formats and functionality	03/17
Beta version of data platform ready for population and testing with Oman data	10/17
Trialled and refined data platform ready for import of data from Pakistan and Iran (this has been replaced by data from India - imported in Dec '17, Pakistan data still pending).	01/18
Final Arabian Sea data archiving platform and expanded Flukebook functionality for wider cetacean community	06/18