

*National Whale and Dolphin Research Conference Adelaide 21-22 February 2006*

*Opening speech*

*Anne-Marie Delahunt, Assistant Secretary Environment Assessment Branch*

Good morning everyone.

I have great pleasure in welcoming you to the Australian Government's National Whale and Dolphin Research Conference 2006.

The Minister for the Environment and Heritage, the Hon Ian Campbell has asked me to give his apologies. He had hoped to both open and attend this conference.

As I'm sure you are aware, the Minister is strenuous in his efforts to protect and conserve whales and other cetaceans.

He is also keen to see that the community and interested groups are involved in the work underway to conserve whales and dolphins. As well as encouraging you to participate and share your knowledge and ideas he also hopes that the conference will be enjoyable for all participating. The program over the next two days will I'm sure be interesting and rewarding. Catching up with colleagues and friends and meeting new ones is also part of what this conference is about.

Some of us had the somewhat unique opportunity of touring the South Australian Museum's skeleton preparation facility at Bolivar last night, for which we thank the South Australian Museum and also the International Fund for Animal Welfare for providing food and drinks.

Tonight we will all benefit from the generosity of the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society at their "Dolphin Dinner Cruise" – or should I say, "Dinner Cruise to see Dolphins", for which we are very grateful.

Whales and dolphins are important to the Australian community – the protection of whales has over the last 25 years become part of the psyche of the Australian people. It is not surprising then, that protecting these animals continues to be a high priority for the Australian Government.

The Minister takes very seriously the role that the Australian Government has in the conservation of cetaceans. He is personally engaged in our international work, where Australia is a global leader in efforts to eliminate, on a permanent basis, commercial and scientific whaling. Our national work to protect and aid the recovery of species within our own waters is also leading edge.

The Minister is extremely proud of the Australian Government's achievements relating to whale conservation and clearly he has no intention of lessening the Government's efforts in this area.

All those involved in whale and dolphin issues within the Government are acutely aware of the importance that scientific information and knowledge plays in ensuring that our conservation policies and environment protection legislation achieves its aims.

Since 1996 the Australian government has provided over 3 million dollars towards the conservation of cetaceans. This funding has supported the work of scientists, students, non-government organisations and conservation managers around Australia who are closing gaps in our knowledge, and developing new and better ways of managing human interactions with these animals.

Many of you participating in this conference have been instrumental in establishing Australia's reputation as a world leader in cetacean research. The Minister and DEH appreciate and value your efforts.

This is the second cetacean conference the Government has funded on the themes of research priority and collaboration.

Many of you attended the first conference in Ballina almost two years ago. That conference was of great value to us at DEH - the information gathered and the discussions held enabled us to identify research priorities over the past two years.

The Australian Government's interest in cetaceans is broad ranging. Federal involvement encompasses the full range of species – from the blue whale through to the bottlenose dolphin, and a broad spectrum of issues – noise, strandings, whale watching and of course opposition to commercial and scientific whaling.

That said, we do have a number of pressing responsibilities:

- At the international level Australia has led the way to achieve the International Whaling Commission moratorium on commercial whaling and the establishment of the Indian Ocean and Southern Ocean Whale Sanctuaries. Recent efforts have focussed on achieving a permanent ban on commercial whaling and opposing all forms of scientific whaling. Australia has also argued successfully for continued protection within other international treaties – such as CITES and CMS.
- Nationally, the Australian Government has a significant role in:

- The recovery of nationally threatened species;
- The protection and management of species within the Australian Whale Sanctuary.
- And in the protection of cetaceans – as matters of national environmental significance through the assessment and management of marine industries and activities that may impact upon them.

To help us with this work we need information. We need to know where the issues and risks are – not just perceived, but real and tangible. We also need to know how to manage and mitigate and we must be able to make an informed decision today.

The governments of Australia - and yes I mean all of them working together - have recently undertaken an extensive review and consultation process to update and improve the National Whale Watching Guidelines 2005. Guidelines that I fully believe set a global benchmark.

In developing these guidelines it was evident that there was much we still did not understand about the impacts on whales and dolphins from tourism activities and other close encounters between people and cetaceans.

The lack of scientific certainty should not and must not stop us in making decisions and managing issues as they arise. Rather the lack of definitive information should be the catalyst to make us hungry for knowledge and eager to ensure that we are adaptive and open to new ideas and innovation.

In the next few months the Australian Government will finalise guidelines for interactions between whales and seismic survey activities. Will we get them right? Based on what we know now – yes I think so. Will we be certain? - probably not. However, we will continue to improve these guidelines and our other environmental policies and regulations, based on well directed and objective scientific enquiry.

The question that we must continually ask ourselves is - is the research we are conducting answering the right questions and addressing the most pressing concerns? Is the information gathered helping us do the job better?

The information obtained at Ballina and from the projects funded has aided significantly in the finalisation of the National Recovery Plans for the blue, fin, sei, southern right and humpback whales. These plans are there to guide our efforts so that these species can recover from the impact of commercial whaling.

Each plan identifies the need to establish a research program to identify threats and important habitat areas, monitor recovery and manage human interactions. Today we will hear success stories about the recovery rates of humpback and southern right whales. Our challenge with blue, fin and sei whales is to understand what is happening. Information on basic numbers, trends and distribution remain the primary challenges.

I hope that by the end of the conference to have heard innovative ideas to address these problems.

For the Department's National Whale and Dolphin Conservation Team this conference presents the best opportunity to engage with the relevant researchers and stakeholders on defining and improving the research programs called for in the recovery plans. What specific projects and studies should be undertaken? How should they be run and who should be involved?

Solutions are also needed for our other whales and dolphins.

The long awaited Review of the Conservation Status of Small Cetaceans was recently completed.

The report underscores the continuing reality of insufficient information on nearly every aspect of small cetacean knowledge. This knowledge gap is challenging – yes we need to improve our knowledge, but first we need to identify the best, most efficient ways to do this, given our limited resources – something that is easier said than done.

The report is up on our newly revamped whales web site (the banners here carry the URL). The site provides access to all government whale pages and incorporates our National Whale and Dolphin Sightings and Strandings Database and our Species Information Database (better known as SPRAT). The revamped website was an innovation undertaken following calls at the last conference for better access to the Government's whale and dolphin work. We are very happy with the new-look site and hope that you find it useful and interesting. More improvements are planned so if you have any ideas let us know.

Of course the next two days are not just about future government research needs. One of the major successes of Ballina, and a key reason behind holding this conference, is to provide a forum where we can all learn about the research advances in the past two years – hear about what work is currently underway – and meet those involved.

During the conference we will hear from over 40 researchers, environment managers, industry representatives and the odd government bureaucrat. This is only a small selection of people engaged and interested in cetacean research. And I apologise to those of you who we were unable to fit into

the program this time round. Given the number of people interested in presenting research papers we could easily have stayed for a week.

The volume, range and intellectual weight of cetacean research in Australia is phenomenal. The level of public and political interest in whales and dolphins is mirrored by the level of academic and scientific interest. I'm particularly pleased that representatives from:

- Conservation and animal welfare organisations
- The Department of Defence
- Scientific and academic institutions
- and industries such as tourism, fishing and the oil and gas exploration industry.

Will also share with us their current work and future research needs and directions.

In holding this conference, we are acknowledging that the questions for future cetacean conservation and management require a collaborative effort between all of us with an interest in the outcomes.

Different stakeholders have different priorities yet we all have responsibility for environmental stewardship. It is up to each sector to determine how and in what fashion they contribute.

Thank you and enjoy the conference!