

NAMMCO Council Meeting 22-25 March 2021

Opening Statement on behalf of the Secretariat of the International Whaling Commission Rebecca Lent, Ph.D.

Madame Chair, NAMMCO Commissioners, Madame General Secretary and members of the Secretariat, and Fellow Observers:

We trust that you and your families are doing well in such challenging times.

On behalf of the International Whaling Commission, we wish to express our gratitude for the invitation to join this week's meeting of the Council of the North Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission. As we gather once again in a virtual setting, we are reminded of the one thing this pandemic cannot take away, notably our common mission of cetacean science and stewardship. We are grateful for our partnership which is even more valuable given the challenges to carrying out our mission over the past year.

We thank the General Secretary and her team, and the NAMMCO members for the collaborative work already in place in the management and conservation of cetaceans. We welcome, in particular, collaboration between our scientists, whether through their research programs on the ground or their engagement in meetings and workshops. We take this opportunity to thank the NAMMCO staff members and members who participated in the 2020 IWC virtual Scientific Committee meetings. This year's IWC Scientific Committee will again meet virtually, 27 April – 14 May 2021. A number of pre-SC workshops will be held, addressing amongst other things the latest abundance estimates, climate change, the role of cetaceans in the ecosystem, and status and threats to small cetaceans under Conservation Management Plans.

This year marks the 75th anniversary of the signing of the Whaling Convention, a milestone that is impressive in its longevity and reflects the Commission's ability to adapt. The IWC is as important and relevant today as it was in 1946 because it has evolved in response to an ever-changing environment. The mandate remains unchanged: the regulation of whaling and conservation of whale stocks, but the threats to whale stocks have changed considerably and our two organisations share interests in managing these threats. Bycatch and entanglement in fishing gear is the greatest single threat, and NAMMCO's BYCELS and IWC's Bycatch Mitigation Initiative seek to expand efforts to monitor and mitigate bycatch through collaborative work with the fishery sector to achieve practical and viable options. There are potentially opportunities for closer collaboration through these groups, including knowledge sharing on effective solutions and approaches for addressing bycatch – vital for building capacity and knowledge across different regions – as well as for strandings and entanglement response.

Whales and other cetaceans also face ship strikes, ocean noise, marine debris, chemical pollution and, of course, climate change, threats that have increased significantly since IWC was formed. It is thanks to the flexibility and resilience of the IWC, and the many benefits of partnerships with other organisations such as NAMMCO, that we are able to raise awareness of these challenges in other fora and find workable solutions.

For example, NAMMCO and IWC collaborated in the development of the FAO Marine Mammal Bycatch Guidelines, which were welcomed at FAO COFI in February of 2021. IWC and NAMMCO participate in the FAO's Regional Secretariat's Network to explore collaboration with RFMOs and other organisations to design and implement viable solutions to bycatch and entanglement.

On strandings, we note with interest NAMMCO's work with member countries to establish national stranding response networks and to collate strandings information to better understand and manage the forces behind cetacean mortality. This work has great synergies with the IWC Strandings Initiative, and we welcome collaboration between NAMMCO and the IWC, including with the IWC Strandings Expert Panel to progress our shared aims. We also wish to note that the IWC Secretariat is in the process of recruiting a database manager to oversee the ship strikes database that has been under development for a number of years by the Scientific Committee.

Regarding Aboriginal Subsistence Whaling (ASW), as we reported at NAMMCO's 2019 meeting in the Faroes, the ASW amendment to IWC's schedule put in place a 7-year block of quotas with automatic renewal if there is no change in the science or in the needs of the aboriginal community. In 2019, ASW landings reached some 360 whales in 4 countries with ASW communities.

The IWC maintains records of historical and modern whaling catches, having taken over the role of the Bureau of International Whaling Statistics in the 1980s. The databases are the most comprehensive for any wildlife resource, believed to be a virtually complete record of over 2,360,000 of these animals, including biological details and position information. In December 2020, new and updated versions of the IWC catch databases were released by the Secretariat following a thorough review of existing records, together with new data up to and including the 2019 season. The data are made available on request and interest in obtaining the information has already been expressed. The Secretariat is grateful for the contributions of data from a broad range of countries and researchers including NAMMCO members.

The IWC also maintains a table of the abundance estimates endorsed by the IWC Scientific Committee. It includes information on the status of estimates (e.g., whether they are suitable for providing management advice or else provide a general indication of abundance) and the degree to which the estimate was examined. The IWC looks forward to an increased collaboration with NAMMCO on this important topic, to avoid duplication of effort by our two organisations.

The IWC's Governance Review Report has been carried forward by the Working Group on Operational Effectiveness. This included a workshop in the summer of 2019 and a follow-up virtual workshop planned for this summer (May/June 2021). Several draft papers are now available for review and comment. Once again, the focus of the Governance Review is on how we do our work – including the structure of the Commission and its subsidiary bodies, funding allocation, and the Secretariat. A central theme of the Governance Review is ensuring that the work of the Commission's subsidiary bodies reflects the directives from the Commission. Once again, we wish to express our gratitude to the NAMMCO Secretariat, NAMMCO members and observer delegations, and the scientists from NAMMCO countries for their ongoing collaboration with IWC.

Thank you, Madame Chair, and we look forward to the discussions over the next two days.