

Marine Mammals Committee

Committee Members: R. L. Brownell, Jr., J. P. Dines (Chair), K. M. Dudzinski, H. H. Edwards, J. Lapsertis, M. S. Leslie, T. J. McIntyre, D. K. Odell, T. J. O'Shea, C. W. Potter, S. Sheffield, and E. E. Smith.

Mission:

The Marine Mammals Committee was formed in 1921 and Chaired by E. W. Nelson. It is the longest-standing active Committee of the American Society of Mammalogists. Its mission is to maintain and encourage interest in marine mammals in the ASM, to provide the Society Membership with information about marine mammalogy, including conservation and legislative issues, to spearhead resolutions and legislation involving marine mammals, and to serve as a liaison between ASM and the Society for Marine Mammalogy (SMM). Members of the Marine Mammals Committee are frequently active in both ASM and the Society for Marine Mammals.

Information Items:

(1) The Committee welcomed two new members: Matt Leslie and Emma Smith. Thomas O'Shea is rotating off the Committee and is thanked for his many years of service.

Members of the Committee monitored issues pertinent to the Committee's mission.

(2) IUCN World Conservation Congress, Hawaii, September 2016.

Two motions specific to marine mammals are being considered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) for formal resolutions to be presented at their upcoming World Conservation Congress:

- (a)** The highly endangered vaquita (*Phocoena sinus*) has less than 100 remaining living individuals and is still negatively impacted by bycatch in the illegal fishing for totoaba and its illegal trade in China. The motion before the members of the IUCN calls for immediate action with respect to increased governmental action, increased research, and increased financial support to prevent the vaquita's extinction.

- (b)** The Japanese government continues its program of lethal taking of whales for scientific research despite pressure from the international community; a resolution by the International Whaling Committee (IWC) to cease the activity; and a finding by an expert panel appointed by the IWC Scientific Committee that Japan's research plan did not pass a reasonable standard of peer review and that lethal sampling was not justified. The motion before the IUCN calls on Japan to revoke the self-issued special permits for lethal taking of whales and for an international expansion of non-lethal research on whales.

(3) US Department of Agriculture Proposed Rule for Standards of Care for Marine Mammals in Captivity.

A proposed rule change has been floated that would amend the Animal Welfare Act concerning the humane handling, care, and treatment of marine mammals in captivity. The rule was last updated in 1998. Proposed changes are based on “recent documented scientific data and studies to better ensure humane handling and treatment of marine mammals” particularly with respect to pool exits for animals, water temperature and quality, exhibit air quality and lighting, amount of time without public interaction, etc.

(4) Downlisting of the West Indian manatee.

Citing significant improvements in its population and habitat conditions, as well as reductions in direct threats, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has proposed that the West Indian manatee be downlisted from Endangered to Threatened status under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). A change in listing will include both the Antillean (*Trichechus manatus manatus*) and Florida (*Trichechus manatus latirostris*) subspecies implicitly. According to the USFWS, the proposal to downlist the manatee to Threatened will not affect federal protections currently afforded by the ESA, and the Service remains committed to conservation actions to fully recover manatee populations. A 90 day public comment period closed on 7 April 2016. A final decision on the listing is forthcoming.

(5) US National Marine Fisheries Service classifies Gulf of Mexico Bryde’s whale as an endangered distinct population segment under the Endangered Species Act.

The Natural Resources Defense Council filed a petition last year seeking protection for Bryde’s whales in the northern Gulf of Mexico (GoMx) under the Endangered Species Act. The petition was prompted by a combination of low abundance estimates (<50) and a NMFS study showing these GoMx whales are a distinct lineage from all other known rorquals. NMFS announced a 90-day finding in April 2015 that the petition to list the GoMx whales as distinct population segment (DPS) under the ESA may be warranted. NMFS is currently conducting a status review to determine if the petitioned action is warranted.

Action Items: None.

Respectfully submitted,

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