Report of IUCN Mission to Tokyo – 23 June-3 July 2007

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Background

Between 23 June and 3 July 2007 IUCN staff, Julian Roberts and Francois Simard, undertook a mission to Tokyo, Japan, with the primary purpose of meeting with a broad range of stakeholders interested in the conservation of the western gray whale (WGW). During the week we held a series of meetings with scientists, NGOs and government officials. This brief Mission Report provides an overview of these meetings and the issues and outcomes that were discussed.

Tuesday 26 June

We met with Drs. Tadasu Yamada and Toshio Kasuya at the National Museum to discuss their views on WGW conservation. We spent some time explaining the scope of the Panel and the role IUCN plays as well as the purpose of our trip to Japan.

Both were very open and we discussed a wide range of issues. Yamada provided us with a brief presentation of the stranding/by-catch database that exists and the work he has done on WGWs. We were also shown the skeletal remains of a WGW that was trapped in set nets 2 years ago.

Yamada raised a number of important issues for us to consider:

- There is a need to get better information on the health of individuals trapped in nets. A full necropsy should be done with an experienced team including pathologists. At present the necropsies are carried out by ICR staff and do not include important analysis which could yield vital information.
- There is a need for rescue teams to be trained and funded to assist in the release of entrapped WGWs.
- The legal issues surrounding selling of WGW trapped in nets need to be clarified as presently the legal framework is ambiguous about whether meat from trapped animals can be sold.
- There is a need to provide more information/publicity to the Japanese public as there is very little understanding of the plight of the WGW in Japan. The recent entrapments received quite a lot of publicity but this needs to be more sustained to engage public opinion.

Kasuya is clearly frustrated by the current situation and we discussed the current legal issues surrounding the status of WGWs at some length.

He made it clear that in his view Japan has become a much more important route in the WGW migration as there is little evidence that WGWs are currently moving along the

coast of Korea. We also had some discussions as to why there is an apparent increase in entrapments recently and why females are susceptible. Yamada believes that this could be related to health/condition and reiterated his view that better health assessments of entrapped individuals is essential for us to better understand why these animals might be being caught in the nets

We raised the possibility of including Japanese scientists on the WGWAP (or some alternative mechanism facilitated by IUCN) and while they were supportive of this proposal were concerned at who could be selected to represent Japan on this given the highly political nature of this issue. In this context we also discussed whether they thought there might be value in having an IUCN symposium (or similar forum) to bring together scientists from the various range States. Kasayu in particular felt this would be valuable if for no other reason that to raise the importance of the issue within Japan.

Kasayu also made his concerns over the impacts on the Sakhalin shelf clear.

Wednesday 27 June

We held an open information meeting, with the assistance of Naoko Funahashi (IFAW Japan). The meeting was attended by the following representatives:

Naoko Funahashi - IFAW Japan
Makiko Nakano - IFAW Japan
Sayaka Uematsu - IFAW Japan
Nanami Kurasawa – Ikura & Kujira Action Network
Teppei Dohke – Nature Conservation Society of Japan
Kohei Hibino – Japan Wildlife Research Centre
Sakae Hemmi - Elsa Nature Conservancy
Wataru Suzuki – Assistant Director, Biodiversity Policy Division, Ministry of the Environment
Dr Yoshikazu Uni – Office of nature-human interaction studies, Tokyo University of Agriculture
Tadasu Yamada and Toshio Kasuya also attended

We provided an overview of the WGWAP project, including progress to date, and invited discussion on how IUCN/WGWAP could engage with Japan on the issue of WGW conservation.

A broad range of issues were raised and discussed:

- Some participants felt that the focus on one species was problematic and that there was a need to consider other species.
- Concerns were also raised about doing science on endangered species (in the context of satellite tagging) and it was recognized that there is a need to balance the risks of doing science on endangered populations with the benefits.

- IUCN was asked whether there were any opportunities to establish a Task Force or other mechanism to look at issues in other places to Sakhalin.
- There was general agreement that a lack of public information makes this task harder, since there is no general understanding within the Japanese public of this issue. It was felt that a campaign to highlight the problem of set net entrapment was desirable and than IUCN should be working with media channels in Japan.
- The Nature Conservation Society of Japan is an IUCN member and has quite a lreg membership I Japan. We discussed with them whether we could use their newsletter to write an article highlighting the plight of this population and the specific threats it faces in Japanese waters. We will follow up this possibility.
- We raised the possibility of including Japanese scientists on the Panel which participants thought was a good idea. A suggestion was also raised that we should hold a WGWAP meeting in Japan as this could be used as an opportunity to raise awareness with the press.
- There was some discussion about how we could work with the JFA on this issue and in particular in terms of raising awareness of the issue with fishermen. Some participants felt that the Ministry of the Environment should have a role to play and while they acknowledged that the Ministry has no formal role in terms of whale conservation, Suzuki did seem positive about the possibility of the Ministry working with JFA and other government agencies to address some of the problems.
- The forum certainly provided an opportunity for the Ministry to meet with scientists and NGOs and there was considerable discussion among them about the steps for the future. We raised the option of a government focus group including representatives from Environment, JFA and scientists to look at these issues and the Ministry seemed to think this was something worth pursuing further.
- One issue that the Ministry did raise was the lack of information they had on WGWs and the by-catch problem. Both IUCN and the scientists present agreed to assist in providing information to the Ministry

Friday 29th June

We met with Dr. Hidehiro Kato of the Tokyo University of Marine Science and Technology. He provided us with his perspective on the current situation including a caution that we should approach the issue slowly and methodically and take it “step by step”.

Kato raised a number of important points which he believes are necessary to ensure resolution of the entrapment problem.

- The WGW needs to be listed as “Highly Endangered” under Japanese fisheries protection laws to ensure certainty to fishermen that it is not to be killed and cannot be sold once dead (even if by by-catch). This is the first step and is very important.

This should be achieved before any discussions about Japanese involvement on the WGWAP or other measures are proposed.

- There needs to be research and education on how to release whales from the set nets. This will require coordination between the JFA and the Prefecture Governments. Kato's view is that releasing animals from the fixed set nets is very difficult and they are not the same as the types of nets in the USA where whales have been successfully released.
- Research needs to be undertaken to develop modifications to the set nets to avoid whale entrapment.

We discussed the issue of data sharing in terms of samples/photos from the dead WGWs. Kato's view was that sharing of information is desirable but that under Japanese law, the photos and samples belong to the individual scientists who take them. He explained that photos from the dead whales had now been published in IWC papers. He felt that attempts had been made to cross match these photos in the past but that no consensus had been agreed on the identification of any of the animals except the most recently trapped individual.

We did not push him on this issue but made it clear that we were keen to see how IUCN could facilitate any process that would enable identification of these animals to contribute to the population assessments. In this regard we raised the possibility of the photos being considered in the planned photo-ID workshop. The idea was not dismissed but he restated his point that we should take things "step by step".

If Panel members see any value in us pursuing the idea of having the photos or even a representative from Japan at the photo-ID workshop we will pursue this with the JFA.

Kato also provided us with a number of papers detailing examinations and investigations into the recent trapped whales.

On the same day we also traveled to Odawara City to meet with researchers from the Kanagawa Prefectural Fisheries Technology Centre. We met with Dr Hironori Ishidoya. Dr Ishidoya specializes in the design, construction and performance of fixed set nets. He provided us with a detailed overview of these types of nets, including an examination of numerous scale models, an illustration of how they work and are impacted by current, in the center's flume tank and showed us video footage of one such net being constructed and used. We had planned to take a boat trip to see one of the nets in action but this was not possible in the end.

We discussed Kato's concerns that releasing animals from these nets was difficult and Ishidoya's reaction was that, for the large nets, this was not the case and that there is no reason why animals cannot be released very easily. However, for smaller nets, he acknowledged that entrapment followed by entanglement was a problem. That said, I did not get the impression from him that he thought they would be any more difficult to deal with than those in the US. His view was that small ones would probably be destroyed by animals trapped in them.

While not involved in WGWs in any way, I think this contact may be useful in the future, if for not other reason than to get a different perspective on how to deal with entrapped whales.

Monday 2nd July

Our final meeting was with Hideki Moronuki and Joji Morishita at the Fisheries Agency of Japan. We discussed the Panel and IUCN's role Morishita then provided us with FAJ's perspective on the problem of WGW entrapment.

The first point he made was the work was underway to amend the fisheries protection laws. The amendments will be presented to an Advisory Council of Experts in September and if approved will enter into force the same day. The amendment will list the WGW on a list of protected species and will make it illegal to kill WGWs or to sell their meat after by-catch.

Approval by the Advisory Council is apparently more of a formality as to get to this point requires a decision to have already been made at a political level. Once the amendment has entered into force the FAJ will communicate this with the Prefecture Governments.

There is clearly no intention at this stage to interrupt the set net fishery.

As suggested by Bob (and Randy?) we also asked them whether they would be prepared to nominate a senior scientist to join the Panel. They were certainly not dismissive of the idea and have asked IUCN to write to them requesting Japanese participation in the Panel. We did not discuss who this should be!

At this point it might be worth noting that as a group and as IUCN no decisions have been made about how to engage with Japan. It is not immediately obvious to me that WGWAP is the only or the best option for this and I would therefore welcome some discussions about whether inviting Japanese representation onto the Panel is the most effective mechanism or whether we should look at an alternative model. Given that we might want to ask the same question from S. Korea and maybe China, perhaps a Task Force type mechanism would be better. Any thoughts?

We also raised the issue of data sharing. This is clearly a sensitive issue but we did raise the possibility that if a direct data sharing mechanism could not be agreed upon perhaps IUCN could facilitate an alternative mechanism.

On this point, assuming it goes ahead, is it worth inviting the Japanese to attend the photo-ID Task Force workshop and to bring their photos along to that for comparison with both catalogues??