

Twenty Eighth SPREP Meeting of Officials

Apia, Samoa
19 – 21st September 2017

Agenda Item 12.1.1 : Year of the Whale: Whales in a Changing Ocean Conference: Outcomes and Next Steps

Purpose

1. The purpose of this paper is to advise Members about events during the Year of the Whale, and in particular the Whales in a Changing Ocean conference hosted by the Government of Tonga in Nuku'alofa 4-6 April, 2017; and the outcomes and next steps arising from the conference.

Background

2. Members declared 2016/2017 the Year of the Whale, with the theme of Protecting Ocean Travellers and a core message that by protecting the oceans, we not only protect whales, but we also protect ourselves and future generations of Pacific islanders.
3. This message was reinforced at the exhibition *Des baleines et des hommes*, a collaboration between artists from New Caledonia, Niue, Tonga and Aotearoa/New Zealand that opened at the Tjibaou Cultural Centre in Noumea on 2 March and runs for 6 months before moving to Kone in Northern Province for two months. SPREP would support touring the exhibition to other centres in the Pacific islands, if adequate funding can be secured.
4. The most important event of the Year of the Whale was the conference 'Whales in a Changing Ocean', which was the first public conference on whales ever to be held in the Pacific islands. Preparations for the conference took one year, and the event was made possible through a collaboration between SPREP and the Auckland Institute of Studies and the generous support of the Government of Tonga as hosts; the primary sponsors – the Governments of Sweden, Australia and New Zealand, the European Union and the Okeanos Foundation; and a host of supporters and donors.
5. Sixteen governments were represented at the conference, three at Ministerial level and the others at senior official level. Both regional and international NGOs participated in the conference, as well as experienced researchers and whale-watch operators. The conference was chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister of Tonga, Hon. Siaosi Sovaleni, and the Tongan Minister of Fisheries, the Hon. Semisi Fakahau.

6. The conference featured keynote presentations on the status and trends of whales in the Pacific islands region, and government representatives negotiated the final text of the Year of the Whale Declaration on Whales in the Pacific islands, which was signed by eleven countries. The Declaration remains open for signature until 31 December 2017.
7. Self-selected working groups discussed three main themes:
 - Development of best practice whale-watching
 - Collaboration on scientific research
 - Addressing emerging threats
8. Each working group was required to summarise its conclusion in a single recommendation, which became the Outcomes Document for the conference.
9. Country representatives also negotiated the text of a Voluntary Commitment, to be presented at the UN Oceans Conference, June 5-9, 2017. The Voluntary Commitment was open for signature by any country or organisation that wishes to play an active role in supporting the future conservation of whales in the Pacific islands.
10. Full details of the conference are available on the SPREP website:
<https://www.sprep.org/whales-in-a-changing-ocean-conference-2017/home>

Recommendations

11. The Meeting is invited to:
 - **note** the report of the Whales in a Changing Ocean conference;
 - **note** the contents of the Pacific Islands Year of the Whale Declaration and consider signing the Declaration if not already a signatory;
 - **note** the undertakings given by some Members in Voluntary Commitment #16006 made to the UN Ocean Conference and **consider** how best to provide support; and
 - **agree** to contribute through the Whale and Dolphin Action Plan 2018-2022 and other mechanisms towards the effective conservation of whales in the Pacific islands region.

15 August, 2017

