

Whales in a Changing Ocean

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FOR MINISTER K. TUREPU
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COUNTRY UPDATE STATEMENT

WHALES IN A CHANGING OCEAN CONFERENCE, NUKU'ALOFA, TONGA;

4 – 6 APRIL 2017

Kia Orana Koutou Katoatoa

Kia Orana Your Excellency, Honourable **Siaosi Sovaleni, Deputy Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Tonga** and Minister for Meteorology, Energy, Information, Disaster Management, Environment, Climate Change and Communications.

Please allow me, at this time, to convey the sincere appreciation from my **Queen's Representative Tom Marsters** and the **Government and People of the Cook Islands** to the **Royal Family, Government and People of the Kingdom of Tonga** for receiving and hosting us here in Tonga – Kia Orana.

Your Excellency, Honourable **Semisi, Fakahau**, Minister for **Fisheries** for Tonga – Kia Orana

Your Excellency, Honourable **Semisi Sika**, Minister for **Tourism** for Tonga – Kia Orana

Your Excellency, Honourable **Faime Mataafa, Deputy Prime Minister of Samoa** – Kia Orana

Your Excellency, Mr Andrew Ford, **Australian High Commissioner** – Kia Orana

Your Excellency, Ms Sarah Walsh, **New Zealand High Commissioner** – Kia Orana

Members of the Diplomatic Core – Kia Orana

Mr Kosi Latu, Director General of SPREP and your team, Kia Orana.

Distinguished **country delegates and representatives, expert speakers and presenters, Ladies and Gentlemen**

Kia Orana.

It gives me great pleasure to be here in the Kingdom of Tonga at this **very first Whales in a Changing Ocean conference** and I would like to acknowledge with appreciation the **generous hospitality provided by our hosts**, the Government and people of Tonga.

I would also like to acknowledge the support provided by governments of **Sweden, New Zealand and Australia**, and partners to make this conference happen.

I am happy to be here at this venue with fellow ministers and government officials to **discuss, promote and plan the current and future management of our ocean giants**, the Whale or in the Cook Islands – **Toora**.

The Cook Islands recognizes the **value and importance** that these majestic creatures play in our **oceans, environment, economy and more importantly, our culture**. Further to this, the Cook Islands **recognizes and acknowledges that their populations have dramatically declined** due to **overharvesting and human pressures applied on their breeding, migration and feeding grounds and habitats**.

The Cook Islands has recorded **26 species of Cetacean in its waters**, this number has **increased since 2007**, where the number was 21, **due to the research and efforts** of government and in particular **Ms Nan Hauser** of the **Cook Islands Whale Research Center**. Nan has been the cornerstone of Cook Islands Whale Research, her **tireless efforts to discover** and **unwavering commitment** to whales and dolphins, **in particular, Cook Island whales and dolphins** has underpinned our efforts to safeguard these **sentinels of the sea**.

Our most well-known species is, of course, the **Endangered Humpback Whale**. The Humpback Whale arrives in winter, from **June to October**, a use the Cook Islands as a **corridor to migrate to true breeding ground**, most likely in Tonga. However **we have recorded calving** occurring in our waters **which does make these individuals special to Cook Island people**.

A **unique characteristic of the Cook Islands Humpback population** is that we have **observed almost zero fidelity!** In 17 years of research, we have only seen 2 whales return to the Cook Islands, all other whales recorded have been new visitors. This is **extremely unusual since humpbacks tend to return to the same area during their lifetime**.

To bring effect to the recognition of the value of whales in the Cook Islands and in **alignment with outcomes of the 32nd Pacific Islands Leaders Forum**, the Cook Islands, **in 2001**, declared its entire Exclusive Economic Zone, an area of almost 2 million square kilometers as a **Sanctuary for Whales**.

Through this declaration, the Cook Islands commits to;

- **Promotion of non-lethal scientific research** on whales;
- **Collaboration for information exchange**, education and awareness initiatives; and

- **Best practice management for the interactions** with whales in our waters

Since the declaration **civil society and government collaborated** to establish rules that were published and **enforced through consent and cooperation**. These measures are no longer sufficient and we now look **to formalise the Whale Sanctuary declaration**. Through a **consultative legislative process**, it is my hope that the **Cook Islands will demonstrate once again its innovation and leadership** by making the waters of the **Cooks Islands a true sanctuary**, a unique place in the South Pacific where **whales can thrive in harmony with human activity**.

The Cook Islands are currently on a **pathway to develop the necessary legislative framework** to formalize the declaration and regulate human interactions with whales. **Legislation will maintain the spirit and intentions of our 2001 Declaration** and look to **managing interactions from unlawful take, fisheries and strandings, to name a few**.

I am extremely **pleased to announce**, here at this Conference, that Cook Islands has also **declared its entire EEZ as a Marae Moana – Marine Park**. The Cook Islands is **committed to raising to standards on ocean stewardship** and management of its natural resources. As part of this commitment, the **Cook Islands has just recently declared that all waters within 50 nautical miles of our islands as protected from commercial fishing**, this equates to **16.25% of our EEZ**. It is anticipated that through this commitment, the **Cook Islands reduces the interactions between the commercial fishing sector and whales in our waters**. This decision aligns with an existing commitment from the Cook Islands to **also exclude any possible future sea bed mineral activities from within 50 nautical miles** of and island.

In the lead up to the **United Nations Conference on Oceans**, graciously **co-hosted by the Governments of Sweden and Fiji**, I believe this Whales in a Changing Ocean conference is **timely and relevant** to our steps towards the **achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular, Development Goal 14**.

I look forward to sharing the Cook Islands experiences and learning from countries around the table on how best we can, together, demonstrate our cultural and national stewardship of our Moana Nui o Kiva and the bounty it provides.

Kia Orana and Kia Manuia

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