

Irish Whale and Dolphin Group

Five Year Development Plan (2006-2010)

The Irish Whale and Dolphin Group (IWDG) was established in December 1990 and is an All-Ireland group *“dedicated to the conservation and better understanding of cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoises) in Irish waters through study, education and interpretation”*

In December 1999, the IWDG was granted charitable status (CHY 11163) by the Revenue Commission and became a Limited Company in October 2000. Since 2000, the IWDG has grown into a credible, effective NGO with a growing membership and increasing influence on government policy and actions. In June 2001 the IWDG published its first five-year development plan to cover the period 2001-2005. This was adopted by its membership and it focused the work of the group over this period.

Five year plan: 2001-2005

During this period the IWDG has enjoyed unprecedented growth both in membership, activity and turnover. In 2003 we launched an initiative called ISCOPE, which sought to increase participation in cetacean recording. Due to ISCOPE the rate of the number of strandings and sightings data submitted to the IWDG has increased considerably and a new, more efficient system of data handling and management has been developed. This includes on-line access to the IWDG Strandings and Sightings database through the website www.iwdg.ie. Also on this site are advanced search options enabling interpretation of these data. The IWDG believes this system is a good model for biological data handling and dissemination. The IWDG ferry survey initiative has expanded to include other ships of opportunity (ShOPs) especially access to the states research vessel RV Celtic Explorer.

In addition to developing the stranding and sightings schemes, which are the core work of the IWDG, a large number of publications and resources have been produced. These include poster and postcards produced in collaboration with ENFO for the hugely successful “Flukeprints” exhibition, a laminated identification guide for boat users and the innovative and

interactive cetacean identification DVD, which is a unique development in the world of training in cetacean identification and recording.

Research projects have been dominated by the IWDG Large Whale Project which was initiated in 2003. The foundation of this project was the increase in sightings of fin and humpback whales along the south coast of Ireland in recent years. This project attempted to try and determine what is influencing the regular occurrence of these whales along this coastline and try and use this unique opportunity to contribute to our understanding of their ecology in the North Atlantic. This project included the IWDG Humpback whale expedition to Cape Verde Islands off west Africa, a possible breeding ground of Irish humpback whales.

Five year plan: 2006-2010

The actions in our draft new five-year plan are listed in order of priority. We welcome any comments or input into achieving this plan.

1. Strandings

The number of stranded cetaceans reported to the IWDG is increasing steadily with over 100 reported annually since 2003. The IWDG have established a database of all published stranding records which is accessible through their website (www.iwdg.ie). This provides easy access to records for all interested parties. The increase in records undoubtedly reflects greater awareness and interest in cetaceans in general, but the IWDG thinks that many stranded animals still go unreported. Recording stranded animals is important but understanding what is driving these stranding events, and making the most of the research opportunities stranded animals provide, is equally important. The IWDG will strive to build on the existing stranding scheme by developing structures and procedures to collect the appropriate data to interpret stranding records.

Objective – to continue to record cetaceans stranded on the Irish coast and develop structures and procedures to collect the appropriate data to enable correct interpretation of stranding records.

Constraints:

- i) Sufficient coverage, especially along the west coast,
- ii) training in basic post-mortem techniques,

Actions:

- i) promote and encourage stranding scheme, especially in areas with poor coverage
- ii) provide training courses in identification, recording and basic post-mortem techniques
- iii) provide access to stranding records on the website and publish records annually to the Irish Naturalists' Journal.

5 year plan:

- i) Train volunteers to visit and fully record all strandings reported to the IWDG.
- ii) Provide refresher courses on identification and recording to volunteers.
- iii) Publish all stranding records in the Irish Naturalist's Journal and encourage annual interpretation of records to be included.
- iv) Develop relationships with key partners such as the local authorities, Gardaí and coastguard.
- v) Produce stranding information sticker for distribution at all coastal sites.
- vi) Develop system of tagging or marking all stranded animals that have been recorded to minimize duplication of records.
- vii) Initiate and encourage collection of basic tissue samples for genetic and pollutant analysis.
- viii) Establish basic tissue archive.
- ix) Liaise and collaborate with similar schemes in adjacent waters.

2. Live strandings

The number of live stranding events reported to the IWDG has increased in recent years and the IWDG is increasingly being called out to assist at these events. However, the IWDG considers the best use of limited resources is to work with other groups with a welfare brief to promote best practice. The IWDG considers the responsibility to react to a live stranding incidence is with the National Parks and Wildlife Service and will continue to support them to provide assistance to live stranded animals and encourage best practice.

Objective – to continue to respond to live stranding events reported to the IWDG where resources allow and to assist agencies involved, especially the National

Parks and Wildlife Service, to implement best practice with regard to stranded cetacean welfare.

Constraints:

- i) sufficient number of trained people around the coast to react rapidly to a live stranding event,
- ii) experience, training and equipment in live-stranding assistance,

Actions:

- i) respond to live stranding events reported to the IWDG in the most appropriate way
- ii) to advise professional staff (Dúchas, DoE(NI)) as to current “best practice”
- iii) to help develop and promote policies on best practice
- iv) to work with other organisations and departments with the same objectives
- v) to encourage tagging of refloated cetaceans

5 year plan:

- i) to organise and deliver one live stranding training workshop annually
- ii) develop a capacity to recover data on live strandings from IWDG Stranding database
- iii) Review live stranding procedure and protocols
- iv) encourage tagging of refloated animals
- v) Produce a DVD of live stranding guidelines
- vi) Develop links with key partners such as dive clubs, Irish Seal Sanctuary, coastguard, RNLI and the Gardaí
- vii) Encourage professional veterinary bodies and institutions to provide training in marine mammal pathology and live strandings

3. Sightings

The IWDG Sighting schemes have seen rapid development over the life of the previous plan. Considerable resources have been invested in organizing and delivering training courses, producing identification guides and developing on-line access to sighting records. The IWDG need to build on this good work as coverage is still poor over large areas of the Irish coast, including offshore waters. The IWDG will continue to offer training courses and distribute resources for identification and recording. Utilising “ships of opportunity” is seen as a key action to improve coverage and the relationship with the Marine Institute is particularly welcome.

Objective – to co-ordinate a sighting scheme to determine the distribution and relative abundance of cetaceans around the Irish coast and within the Irish EEZ including seasonal and geographical distribution and to identify critical habitats and potential threats.

Constraints:

- i) sufficient coverage and human resources,
- ii) accurate species identification
- iii) human resources

Actions:

- i) promote and encourage involvement in the sighting schemes and identify regions with poor coverage
- ii) provide training courses in identification and recording of cetaceans
- iii) organise whalewatching courses and sighting events
- iv) develop and expand use of “ships of opportunity”.

5 year plan:

- i) Continue to update sightings database as close to real time as possible,
- ii) Continue to provide training to relevant government staff to make cetacean recording a routine and expected part of all surveys carried out by government institutions in Irish waters,
- iii) expand constant effort sighting scheme to include at least 12 headlands around the coast,
- iv) continue to co-ordinate ferry services and expand routes to cover the North Irish Sea
- v) Source funding to enable use of “Ships of Opportunity” to survey areas with poor coverage,
- vi) Produce a “gap analysis” on present knowledge of geographical and seasonal abundance of cetaceans in Irish waters to identify areas requiring further study,
- vii) Publish 5 year review of sightings,
- viii) Produce annual review of results from ferry surveys in collaboration with EU partners,
- ix) Offer training in cetacean identification and surveys at sea methods to a high standard for marine mammal observers/recorders,
- x) Develop relationships with sail training vessels Asgard II, Jeanie Johnston, Lord Rank (Northern Ireland) and the sea angling community to record cetacean sightings,
- xi) Develop relationships with sail training vessel Asguid, OJT (northern Ireland) and the sea angling community to record cetacean sightings,
- xii) Produce poster (AO) for ferries to inform about work of IWDG and encourage onboard whalewatching

4. Education

The IWDG recognise that increasing awareness and interest of cetaceans in Irish waters is essential to achieving our stated objectives. Education and awareness pervades through all IWDG activities and is integrated into all IWDG schemes. However we recognise that specific resources are needed to achieve this objective. The IWDG website has been developed as the most important source of information on cetaceans in Ireland and we will continue to develop this essential tool.

Objective: to increase the awareness in Ireland and abroad of the importance of Irish waters for cetaceans and to provide information on cetaceans in Irish waters.

Constraints:

- i) funding
- ii) dissemination of information

Actions:

- i) continue to develop the website as an education tool
- ii) produce regular reviews of strandings and sightings
- ii) promote cetaceans and the work of the IWDG in Ireland and abroad

5 year plan:

- i) Further develop website as a resource for education
- ii) Continue and expand "Whalewatch Ireland"
- iii) Promote IWDG/ENFO "Flukeprints" exhibition
- iv) Promote the erection of two whalewatching boards per annum around the whole Irish coast
- v) Target marine SACs for raising awareness of the marine environment
- vi) Engage with Local Authorities to contribute to Local Biodiversity Plans
- vii) Organize a whale and dolphin conference every two years
- viii) Establish and promote international collaborative projects across Irish and Celtic Seas
- ix) Participate in international conferences
- x) Place PDF archive of the newsletter "IWDG News" on website

5. Projects

The IWDG have identified key areas, which can strongly influence the conservation of cetaceans in Irish waters. Involvement in these issues and projects will have a large impact and contribute immensely to the aims and objectives of the IWDG. Continuation of the IWDG Large whale project is considered a high priority over the next 5 years. The IWDG are also increasingly being asked to comment on a range of issues affecting the marine environment and the animals that live within it. Many of these issues are complex and require much research but the IWDG intend to take a more proactive role in these issues in order to influence government policy.

Objective - identify key projects and issues, which the IWDG will actively promote and support.

Constraints:

- i) Funding
- ii) Human Resources

Actions:

- i) promote best practice with key partners, including government departments and agencies
- ii) run the Large Whale project for the next 5 years

5 year plan:

- i) Promote best practice with government departments and agencies including:
 - a. Promote acoustics as a method of surveying cetaceans including onboard state vessels
 - b. Identify critical habitats for cetaceans and promote active conservation measures
 - c. Publish policy paper on fisheries and cetacean bycatch and offshore exploitation including windfarms
- ii) Support the Large whale project especially:
 - a. Continue obtaining images for photo-identification
 - b. Continue obtaining skin samples for genetics
 - c. Deploy Time Depth recorders
 - d. Accompany annual herring acoustic survey if berths available
 - e. Collaborate in international research programmes
 - f. Explore options for satellite tracking
- iii) Develop course for whalewatching operators and marine tourism vessels on marine wildlife and best practice for minimizing impact and maximizing opportunities

- iv) Launch campaign on the Harbour porpoise “Ireland’s smallest whale” to promote awareness and conservation concerns
- v) Maintain watching brief on Corrib Gas Field development

6. Structure

The IWDG have a Steering Committee of up to 10 people and a board of Directors of six people. The Committee meets at least three times a year, usually over a weekend, to discuss projects and the overall direction of the IWDG. Most routine business is carried out through email. The Committee can co-opt persons to the Committee if they feel they can contribute to the aims of the IWDG. An AGM is held at least every 18 months. Members are encouraged to direct and advice the Committee on issues or events they consider the IWDG should be involved in but the present 5 year plan will drive the IWDG over the period of the plan.

Objective – to maintain a framework to enable the IWDG to meet stated objectives.

Constraints:

- i) Resources, both human and financial
- ii) Poor collaboration with other groups and agencies with same objectives

Actions:

- i) seek funding to employ staff for IWDG
- ii) seek collaboration outside of the IWDG
- iii) develop and sell merchandise

5 year plan:

- i) increase membership to 1500 by 2010
- ii) encourage local involvement in local watches and events
- iii) Continue to fund Co-ordinator, Membership Secretary and Treasurer
- iv) Seek funding for a Database Manager
- v) Identify other organizations with similar objectives to develop links including mentoring/advice.
- vi) seek collaboration with third level institutions in Ireland, including teaching opportunities
- vii) seek cross-border (north/south) funding for All-Ireland schemes

viii) explore EU funding options

ix) seek patrons to promote the aims of the group

Adopted at the IWDG AGM on 7 May 2005