



SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE

TWENTY-FIRST REGULAR SESSION

Tonga

13 – 21 August 2025

Developing a Cetacean Identification Guide for the Pacific Ocean

WCPFC-SC21-2025/EB-WP-10

IWC

Title: Developing a Cetacean Identification Guide for the Pacific Ocean

Abstract:

Accurate species identification is critical for effectively monitoring and managing cetacean interactions in fisheries, as different species vary in their conservation status, biological characteristics and vulnerabilities. WCPFC Conservation and Management Measure 2024-07 requires members to report interactions with cetaceans in purse seine and longline fisheries. However, reporting is limited due to the difficulty of correctly identifying species that interact with fisheries. This proposal seeks WCPFC approval to develop a Cetacean Identification Guide designed specifically for use by Pacific Ocean observers, fishers, and compliance officers. The guide will support the implementation of CMM 2024-07 and help Members meet broader obligations such as those under the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. It will contribute to improved data collection, capacity building, and the conservation of marine biodiversity in the Pacific Ocean.

Justification:

At WCPFC21, the Commission agreed that a cetacean identification guide should be developed to improve species identification by captains and crew in the WCPO. In response, the Secretariat consulted the IWC Secretariat regarding existing guides for the Pacific region. Since no suitable resources were available, the IWC Secretariat offered to collaborate with WCPFC to develop a new, region-specific guide. This initiative directly addresses the Commission's directive (Paragraph 668, WCPFC21 Summary Report) and fills a critical gap in tools available to support the effective implementation of CMM 2024-07.

Improving species identification is essential for accurate reporting of cetacean interactions, which remains limited due to identification challenges at sea. A dedicated guide will strengthen observer and crew capacity, enhance the quality of fisheries monitoring data, and support broader obligations under international frameworks such as the FAO Code of Conduct and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. This project, supported by IWC's expertise and WCPFC's coordination, represents a timely and practical step toward improved compliance, data quality, and marine biodiversity conservation in the Pacific Ocean.

Part A: Administrative Summary

1. Project Title

Developing a Cetacean Identification Guide for the Pacific Ocean

2. Organization

International Whaling Commission

3. Administrative Contact

Elizabeth Campbell elizabeth.campbell@iwc.int

4. Principal Investigator and CV

IWC Secretariat

5. Commencement and Completion Date

September 1, 2025-WCPFC SC22, 2026.

6. Project Budget Summary

No funds will be requested from WCPFC or member countries. The IWC, through the FAO-GEF Common Oceans Tuna II project, will fund the development of the Cetacean Guide. The development of the Guides does not consider travel nor operating.

Part B: Project Proposal Description

1) Background and Need

Biodiversity was recognised as a foundational component of sustainable fisheries by the FAO Sub-Committee on Fisheries Management, and the Sub-Committee further encouraged FAO and its Members to support the implementation of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF). In this context, the integration of biodiversity conservation into fisheries management is essential to meeting GBF goals and delivering on the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries. This Code calls on States and fishery users to conserve aquatic biodiversity and to minimise waste, the bycatch of non-target species, and the impacts on associated or dependent species.

Similarly, the WCPFC Conservation and Management Measure 2024-07 addresses the protection of cetaceans from interactions with purse seine and longline fisheries. However, it can be a challenge for observer programmes to report accurate identification and recording of cetacean species, limiting the quality and consistency of bycatch data.

2) Objectives and benefits

To develop a practical, illustrated Cetacean Identification Guide tailored to the fisheries and cetacean species of the Pacific Ocean. This guide will support fisheries observers, vessel crew, and relevant stakeholders in identifying cetacean species encountered during fishing operations, reporting interactions accurately and the effective implementation of CMM 2024-07.

3) Project Outcomes

The Cetacean Identification Guide will be developed by the IWC Secretariat, with guidance and input from the WCPFC Secretariat, the IWC's Bycatch Standing Working Group and the Expert Panel. More information on these IWC groups and experts can be found [here](#).

4) Form of Results

The Guide will include the following:

Species: Whales, dolphins and porpoises distributed in the Pacific Ocean. As the guide will be shared with IATTC, it is best to include all species that can be found across the Pacific, focusing on the temperate/tropic areas.

Information: Species scientific name, common name in English, range, physical characteristics and size to help in the identification process, differences from similar species, and brief description of conservation status.

Images to include per species: Morphometrics, size comparison to humans, blow and fluke shape, and range map.

A digital copy will be shared with WCPFC for their use. The guide will be developed collaboratively between IWC and WCPFC. Copyright and usage rights will be shared or jointly agreed to ensure the product is openly accessible, legally sound, and supports wide dissemination and uptake across the region. All third-party materials will be used under appropriate licensing or with explicit permission.

5) Methods

a. Literature and data review: Compile existing regional cetacean data from observer programs, scientific literature, and stranding records. Review existing ID guides that could be used as sources or examples.

b. Stakeholder engagement: Consult with WCPFC and BMI members to ensure utility and accuracy (three meetings are proposed).

c. Design and production: Develop a draft with species and accompanying information.

*Steps b. and c. will happen in parallel, as the draft should be shared, feedback should be resolved, and so forth.

d. Distribution and training: Disseminate guides to WCPFC at the Scientific Committee meeting in 2026.

6) Risks of project not achieving Project Objectives

Limited engagement from stakeholders—IWC will need the input of WCPFC and cetacean experts.

Limited data—A lack of high-quality images, regional expertise, or verified species records could limit the guide's visual appearance and content.

Time management—Delays in funding may affect production or dissemination efforts.

7) Schedule of Milestones

Timeline for planning with WCPFC							
ACTION	Month 1	Month 2	Month 3	Month 4	Month 5	Month 6	Month 7
Proposal accepted at WCPFC SC and Commission meeting							
Scheduled meeting to review species, format, and content (WCPFC, IWC Expert Panel members)							
Scheduled meetings to review mockups							
Communication and sharing of drafts and progress as needed							

- Presentation of the final mock-up of the Guide is proposed to be at the WCPFC SC 22 meeting.

8) Data management plan (refer to SC20 recommendation below)

No WCPFC data sets are required to support the project.

9) Other Related Projects

The IWC has worked in partnership with FAO to develop advice aimed primarily at fishery managers, fishers and researchers. [Guidelines](#) have been jointly developed to prevent and reduce bycatch. These were followed by a series of [12 factsheets](#) that summarise and illustrate mitigation measures, including acoustic deterrent devices (also known as pingers), how to switch or modify fishing gear types, and temporary area closures. A similar format could be used for the Cetacean Identification Guide.

10) Collaborations

11) Project Staff and CV's

12) Detailed costs against milestones

Supported by the IWC Secretariat