

Irish Whale and Dolphin Group

Annual Report 2008

The Irish Whale and Dolphin Group (IWDG) was established in December 1990 and is *dedicated to the conservation and better understanding of cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoise) in Irish waters through study, education and interpretation*. Since then it has become Ireland's leading marine environmental NGO.

Administration

The IWDG has six members on their Board of Directors and a further three Committee members in addition to ten service providers. Phyllis Ryan stood down on the board of Directors due to family commitments. The IWDG Committee was joined by Conor Ryan and Sabine Springer. Seven people were offered renewed Independent Contractors Agreements with the IWDG as service providers. Additional ICAs were issued during the year to Clare Murray (ISCOPE II Ship Survey co-ordinator), Patrick Lyne (MMO Co-ordinator) and Bernadette Brady (Book-keeper).

At the end of 2008, membership of the IWDG stood at 897, a slight increase on the figure of 888 at the end of 2007. From January 2008, IWDG began accepting standing orders for membership subscriptions and this option has been used by 36 individuals/groups at this stage.

The IWDG signed an Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT) for future collaboration in cetacean research initiatives. IWDG also signed an MOU with the Irish Environmental Network for entry into Social Partnership under the Environmental Pillar.

Operational Review

As part of the continued development of the IWDG an Operational Review of the IWDG Structures and Procedures was commissioned and will be carried out by an outside consultant early in the New Year.

Funding

The IWDG have enjoyed great support from the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), Marine Institute, Heritage Council and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) as well as from our core funder, Inis. Additional project support was received for our Muc Mhara International Conference from the Environment Protection Agency and Dun-Laoghaire Rathdown County Council

Research

Research in order to increase our understanding of the ecology of cetaceans in Ireland and the importance of Irish waters, is of fundamental importance to the IWDG. The IWDG believes good conservation is supported by a strong scientific basis and best

practice. To this aim we encourage, carry out and support research and monitoring of cetaceans in Ireland.

ISCOPE II

The ISCOPE II project, which supports the stranding and sightings schemes, entered its final year. This second three-year ISCOPE project has continued the development of these very important schemes, which are the backbone of the IWDG as well as supporting offshore ship and ferry surveys. The IWDG carried out a Conservation Assessment of all 24 species recorded in Irish waters as part of the governments reporting requirements under the EU Habitats Directive. A Review of Cetaceans in Northern Ireland was also carried out under ISCOPE on behalf of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA; formerly EHS).

PReCAST

A joint IWDG/GMIT bid for funding from the Marine Institute and NPWS was successful. Under this three-year project (PReCAST) we will carry out offshore surveys on Platforms of Opportunity to map cetacean distribution and relative abundance, obtain two years passive acoustic monitoring data at three locations and carry out satellite tracking of fin whales off the south coast. The collected data will be used in a GIS of the Celtic Sea to explore the relationship between cetaceans and their physical and biological environment.

The IWDG in collaboration with GMIT were also successful in two tenders (Harbour porpoise and Small Cetacean Surveys) from the NPWS to carry out surveys at eight sites around the coast. These surveys will support site designations as Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and provide baseline data for future monitoring. A survey team of ten primary observers and seven data loggers were employed during these surveys, which provided a challenge to IWDG logistics and personnel. During 37 survey days, a total of 475 track-lines were surveyed in seastate ≤ 2 for a total distance of nearly 21,000 km. From the 332 sightings a total of 618 individual harbour porpoise were recorded as well as fourteen sightings of a total of 173 common dolphins, four sightings of 46 bottlenose dolphins and 12 sightings of single minke whales. In addition an accumulated total of 214 days at three sites were monitored acoustically using TPODs.

Large Whale Survey

The ongoing Large Whale Survey was this year supported by a Heritage Council Wildlife Grant (2009) and continued to document the presence of individual fin and humpback whales in Ireland. At the start of this season the Irish fin whale catalogue contained images of 42 individual whales and the humpback whale catalogue seven individuals. Following this seasons' fieldwork the fin whale catalogue now includes 62 whales, an increase of 20 (47%) and the humpback whale catalogue 10 whales, an increase of 3 (43%).

Photo-identification

Photo-identification can be used to record individual whales and dolphins to determine their behaviour and movements. During 2008, the IWDG obtained photo-id images of seven species, which have been added to the on-line catalogue (See www.iwdg.ie). Of the 62 individual fin whales recorded, 51 (82%) have only been seen in one year, although 10 of these have had multiple re-sightings within that year. Nine fin whales (15%) have been seen over two years and one each in four and five years. This low re-capture rate suggests a relatively large open population of fin whales and is in sharp contrast to the humpback whale re-sightings. Six of the seven humpback whales (86%) had been re-sighted at least once off the west Cork and Co Waterford coasts. This high re-capture rate suggests strong site-fidelity and low abundance.

The IWDG carried out an analysis of bottlenose dolphin images submitted to the IWDG, including those obtained from Donegal Bay this summer, and contained in catalogues held by GMIT and the SDWF. From a total of 114 individually recognizable dolphins there were 16 matches, which was a re-sighting rate of 14%. Re-sightings ranged over distances of between c130km and c650km and 26 to 760 days. Seven of the dolphins from Donegal Bay matched to Galway Bay and one each to Co Antrim and Cork Harbour. These results suggest there is large-scale movement of transient dolphins along the western seaboard of Ireland and between the south, north and east coasts. This has implications for the conservation of this species, including site designation as a network of SACs.

The IWDG received images from one of our members (Ivan O'Kelly), which proved to be the first photo-ID image of a blue whale in Irish waters. The image was submitted to the north Atlantic blue whale catalogue held by Richard Sears but unfortunately no match was made. 36 photo-ID images of pilot whales and one photo-ID image of a sperm whale were also collected during our offshore surveys.

Conservation

Stranding Scheme

Unusually high numbers of stranded deep-diving species (pilot and beaked whales) earlier in the year led to the IWDG raising concerns, in collaboration with colleagues in the UK, over possible foreign Naval activities off the Irish coast involving low or mid-frequency sonar. A total of 133 strandings were reported to the IWDG during 2008 a decrease of 8% on 2007. The IWDG contributed 40 samples to the Natural History Museum Cetacean Tissue bank and continued to help administer the tissue bank in partnership with the Natural History Museum.

Sighting Schemes

The IWDG received, validated and populated the database with 1,618 sightings in 2008, a decrease of 7% on the previous year. These comprised 12 species, or one-half of all the cetacean species recorded to date in Irish waters. Harbour porpoise were again the most frequently recorded (37%) followed by bottlenose dolphin (16%), common dolphin (14%) and minke whale (12%). We also handled around 150

basking shark sighting records, which was another record year for this species. During 2008 a total of 387 effort related watches were carried out during which 345 sightings were made.

A total of 232 days were spent at sea surveying cetaceans, including conducting our 145th ferry survey since we began ferry surveys in 2001. These data will contribute to ongoing efforts to create a map of the distribution and abundance of cetaceans in all Irish waters in collaboration with the National Biodiversity Data Centre. The IWDG contributed to the Joint Irish Cetacean Database including provision of data-sets and to the UK Joint Cetacean Protocol managed by JNCC including provision of data from the Irish Sea for analysis by CREEM in St Andrews. Data was also provided to the Welsh Countryside Council for their cetacean database, to the University of Aberdeen for a study of the effects of climate change on cetacean distribution and to the Ulster University at Coleraine for GIS mapping of common dolphins off the Southwest Coast.

Four separate aerial surveys were also conducted with the Irish Air Corps Maritime Squadron as part of the PReCAST project.

Policy Advice

The IWDG met with the NPWS early in the year to provide advice on porpoise and dolphins SACs. During July to September the IWDG carried eight line-transect surveys of Donegal Bay to determine the presence and site fidelity of bottlenose dolphins. One of the underlying objectives behind the EU Habitats Directive is to protect representative habitat of species listed of Annex II of the Directive throughout Member States through designation as SACs. Donegal Bay is considered by the IWDG to be a good candidate for designation as an SAC for bottlenose dolphins, however, we recommend further work is carried out to determine how bottlenose dolphins use the bay, especially regarding the regular presence of the same individuals.

Seismic Mitigation Measures

The IWDG provided Marine Mammal Observers for three seismic and multi-beam surveys in Ireland. IWDG commented on an initiative called INEMO and also contributed to four Local Biodiversity Action and Management Plans and a local authority INTERREG project on nature recording. IWDG also made a detailed submission on the proposed Codling Bank Wind-farm and the Corrib Gas Project in Co Mayo in relation to the revised EIS and dealt with several other preliminary queries in relation to development projects in marine habitats.

The IWDG sat on the steering group of the third Irish Offshore Strategic Environmental Assessment for licensing of oil and gas exploration in the Rockall Trough. The IWDG continued to press for a precautionary approach to oil exploration with further research and restrictions of seismic surveys in areas of concern (e.g. Canyon systems as prime habitat for beaked whales and other deep diving cetaceans).

Education

The IWDG website (www.iwdg.ie) remains the most important source of information on cetaceans and marine conservation in Ireland and supports our education and outreach programme. The IWDG Newsletter was re-launched as Míol Mór, under the new Editorship of Andrew Malcolm and was published three times during the year.

The IWDG organised a very successful conference on harbour porpoise entitled “Muc Mhara – Irelands’ smallest whale”. Over 80 people attended the conference with over 150 attending the public event “Tales of the Whales” on the Friday evening.

Welfare

A Welfare Workshop was organised in Galway in May to draw together improved guidelines for the welfare of stranded cetaceans as well as seabirds, turtles and seals. The workshop was delivered in collaboration with the Irish Seal Sanctuary and CMRC in Cork and was well supported including by local vets, NPWS Conservation Rangers and IWDG members.

Marine Tourism

The IWDG delivered a pilot Marine Wildlife Tour Operators Course on Cape Clear Island, Co Cork. The course was attended by 21 operators from Counties Cork, Kerry and Dublin and was well received with interest in rolling it out in Counties Donegal and Galway.

Media

The IWDG facilitated three film Irish crews during 2008, including Crossing-the-Line films and GMTV as well as numerous national and local radio stations and prime time news slots on at least two occasions. During the year, the IWDG wrote articles and provided content and images for a range of local, regional, national and international papers and publications. The IWDG presented three posters and a paper at the European Cetacean Society conference in the Netherlands and contributed to three papers published in peer-reviewed journals.

Dr Simon Berrow

IWDG Co-ordinator
7 February 2009