

Press Release

PARLIAMENT APPROVES A PROTECTED WHALE SANCTUARY IN URUGUAYAN WATERS

By Carol Ann Bassett

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The Uruguayan Parliament today voted unanimously (62-0) to establish a protected sanctuary for migrating whales and other cetaceans. Uruguay's coastline is a major route for the Southern Atlantic right whale, which travels here to mate and raise its calves during the peak migration season from August to November.

The vote was a major victory for this small South American nation, where in the last few years, large development schemes have continued to threaten the very resources that attract tourists from around the world. These plans include a vast open pit iron mine, a deep sea port along a pristine beach in the Department of Rocha to barge the iron ore to China, and the approval of \$1.65 billion USD for offshore seismic testing to international petroleum companies, including Exxon-Mobile and British Petroleum.

The whale sanctuary was first proposed in 2002 by the small nonprofit group, the Organization for the Conservation of Cetaceans (OCC), which created "The Route of the Whale" to raise awareness about sustainable tourism and responsible whale watching. The network extends from the hillside town of Piriápolis north to the Brazilian border. Wooden observation towers mark the way.

"This is a historic moment for Uruguay and the entire world," said marine biologist Rodrigo García Píngaro, founder and executive director of OCC after the historic vote was cast. "It shows that Latin American nations are becoming more united in protecting whales and other marine life in their coastal waters."

Before the vote was cast, Congressman Gerardo Amarilla, former president of the national Commission on the Environment, stressed that from this day forward, all major development projects along Uruguay's coast will require stricter environmental regulations and enforcement before they're officially approved.

"Our goal is to create a natural Uruguay," he noted.