

ALFAGUARA PROJECT¹ / INNOVATION AWARD**1. Activities**

Between August 2006 and January 2008, Centro de Conservacion Cetacea (CCC) has successfully conducted the **Alfaguara Project**, “*Marine Conservation through Marine Ecotourism*” in Puñihuil, a coastal community located in northwestern Isla de Chiloé, southern Chile.

The fourth season of the **blue whale research program** included land based observations and marine and aerial surveys. The results were presented by Miss Barbara Galletti at the Scientific Committee during the 59th annual meeting of the International Whaling Commission (IWC)². Two scientific posters and an oral presentation were also presented by Miss Galletti at the 17th Biennial Conference on the Biology of Marine Mammals³ (South Africa, December 2007). The results raised concerns on the blue whale health status (skinny whales and skin lesions) and several conservation measures were proposed to reduce anthropogenic impacts on the population, as whale watching guidelines, reduction of vessel speed, modification of traffic routes and reduction of coastal pollution from salmon farming.

A **recreational carrying capacity study for penguin watching** operations was conducted in order to raise ecotourism standards in Puñihuil and guarantee that the biodiversity of the “Puñihuil Natural Monument” is not affected by tourism activities. The results and recommendations of the study were presented and adopted as guidelines by the community, tourist operators and regional authorities.

A **land use proposal of the Puñihuil beach** was also conducted in order to facilitate the harmonic development of the activities and protect the natural beauty of the area. The proposal includes a micro zoning of the area where more than 50 per cent should be fully protected from human intervention. It also identifies areas of risk, locations for garbage collectors and walking trails with informative panels. The proposal also recommends the establishment of a parking lot outside the Puñihuil beach in order to avoid traffic impacts this delicate area.

A **community based business proposal** was also carried out in order to provide economical incomes for the administration and maintenance of the area. The proposal will help the orderly development of the activities in the area and will minimize impacts from an accelerated expansion of the tourism industry.

Local public outreach was conducted through presentations made to nearly 200 children between 8 to 15 years old from schools located in the cities of Castro and Ancud and smaller school communities located near Punihuil. The project goals and achievements have been widely presented in local, national and international media.

We also conducted the **first hand experience exchange in Argentina** where local tour operators had the opportunity to empirically learn the benefits of responsible marine ecotourism. The activity was later replicated by the Governor of Isla de Chiloé in other communities.

Five **workshops** on marine conservation, bird watching, marine ecotourism, cultural heritage and local gastronomy were developed in partnership with several leader chilean NGOs. The workshops were attended by a high number of local people.

The results of the Alfaguara project have certainly increased the interest of the public and authorities in marine conservation. Proposals made by CCC to establish a **National Whale Sanctuary** and develop a **National Policy on Conservation and Non Lethal Use of Cetaceans** have been positively received by the government and the congress.

¹ Alfaguara Project has the official support of the Chilean Navy, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Education

² a) Brownell Jr., R.L., Carlson, C., Galletti Vernazzani, B. and Cabrera, E. 2007. Skin lesions on blue whales off southern Chile: Possible conservation implications?. Paper SC/59/SH21 presented to the IWC Scientific Committee, May 2007 (unpublished). 6pp. [Available from the authors]

b) Cabrera, E., Galletti Vernazzani, B and Carlson, C. 2007. Recommendations for whale watching guidelines in the blue whale feeding area of southern Chile. Paper SC/59/WW15 presented to the IWC Scientific Committee, May 2007 (unpublished). 9pp. [Available from the authors]

c) Galletti Vernazzani, B., Carlson, C., Cabrera, E., and Brownell Jr., R.L. 2007. Status of blue whales off Isla de Chiloé, Chile, during 2007 field season. Paper SC/59/SH1 presented to the IWC Scientific Committee, May 2007 (unpublished). 7pp. [Available from the authors]

³ Participation of Miss Galletti at the International Whaling Commission and the Biennial Conference on Marine Mammals were funded by Global Ocean and Marisla Foundation.

2. Alfaguara Project Innovation Award – Outputs Overview

Scientific: The IWC Scientific Committee congratulated the Alfaguara research program and encouraged the continuation of CCC work. It also endorsed the blue whale watching guidelines prepared and presented by our organization and expressed concerns on the health status of blue whales (skinny whales and skin lesions).

During the 17 biennial Conference on the Biology of Marine Mammals, Miss Galletti proposed the establishment of an **inter-regional collaborative photo-identification catalogue** that was welcomed by the blue whale expert panel. Miss Galletti was designated coordinator of the South East Pacific Catalogue that includes blue whales from Gulf of California, Eastern Tropical Pacific and South America.

Community: Tourist operators agreed to **implement a voluntary code of conduct** for blue whale and penguin watching. The National Tourist Service (SERNATUR) committed to advance in the development of a **certification system** for marine ecotourism activities at a national level.

Tourist operators have significantly raised the service standards and the community is positively involved in the implementation of conservations measures that will enable them to comply with international high quality standards for marine ecotourism. The most important travel agency in southern Chile congratulated the achievements of the local operators and are in conversations to include local operators in an international destination catalogue.

Local achievements: CCC signed a **cooperation agreement with the Municipality of Ancud** to position the northwestern area of Isla de Chiloe as the entrance of marine ecotourism and develop trekking paths and coastal platforms for viewing marine and coastal wildlife, among others. CCC was also invited to become a member of the **Consultant Council of the Natural Monument Puñihuil** that is currently working to limit the number of tourism vessels for the penguin watching.

National achievements: The wide support given to conservation proposals promoted by CCC at a governmental and parliamentary level, such as the creation of a **National Whale Sanctuary** and the development of a **National Policy on Conservation and Non Lethal Use of Cetaceans**, demonstrate that the local goals established in the Alfaguara project have a multiplication effect that will surely benefit marine and cetacean conservation in Chile.

3. Alfaguara Project Innovation Award – Future Goals

The project has generated important information and proposals oriented to ensure the conservation of blue whales and marine and coastal ecosystems. However, it is fundamental to continue long term monitoring of ecosystems indicators species and to continue increasing awareness and capacity building among local communities and national and local authorities. Additionally the project has identified important conservation problems or research gaps that had not been previously addressed.

The **goals for the next stage of the Alfaguara research program** include: **(a)** increase knowledge on habitat use, distribution, population size and conservation status of blue whales to propose further effective conservation measures; **(b)** establish sound characteristics of vessels and determine daily and seasonal sound activity patterns of blue, humpback and other whales species identified in the area; **(c)** obtain baseline information on species diversity and habitat distribution in Puñihuil terrestrial ecosystem; **(d)** the quantification of artisan fisheries by-catch and the development of proposals to minimize negative impacts on penguins, small cetaceans and other marine species

The outreach program should include: **(a)** continue strengthening local capacity building for tourist operators; **(b)** develop a comprehensive outreach strategy to inform the public and governmental authorities about the need to strengthen environmental and cultural aspects in marine ecotourism; **(c)** enforce conservation measures and guidelines proposed by CCC for blue whales, the Puñihuil Natural Monument and the Puñihuil beach; and **(d)** continue to actively work towards the development of national policies on the conservation and non lethal use of cetaceans as well as the creation of an effective marine protected area for blue whale feeding habitat in southern Chile.