



Summary Progress Report [March 2008]:

BLUE WHALES IN CHILE: THE GIANTS OF MARINE CONSERVATION

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Over the last three years, the Centro Ballena Azul (Blue Whale Centre - CBA) and allies have made significant progress in bringing attention to the newly discovered blue whale feeding and nursing ground in the Gulf of Corcovado and Chiloé as well as towards the need to establish a large marine and coastal protected area to ensure conservation of this ecosystem.

This project aims at promoting the establishment of a Multiple-Use Marine and Coastal Protected Area (MCPA-MU) while advancing parallel on investigations that allow us to propose scientifically-based guidelines that help the Chilean government establish regulations that control stakeholder activities (such as the salmon farming industry, shipping companies, local communities, future ecotour operators, the Chilean Navy, and others) and possibly generate a positive spillover effect that changes bad-practices currently undertaken into other areas.

Our main study area corresponds to western Chiloé Island, the Gulf of Corcovado and Chonos Archipelago (41° - 44°S). From 2004 onwards we have concentrated efforts in the Gulf of Corcovado, operating from the small village of Melinka, located on Ascención Island (43°53'S; 73°44'W).



Truck and research vessel used by CBA (© R. Hucke-Gaete CBA/UACH 2007). Note RSG logo on the trucks' door.

We have been concentrating additional efforts on community base work, particularly in Melinka. This fishing village is one the most inaccessible community in Chile, as well as one of the poorest. The community wants to be engaged in the process of building an MPA and we have been working with the representatives and the community in general to give all the necessary information and how to plan

strategies and get involved in the process. This includes the conformation of a round table with representatives of different sectors in the area, where the community will consider how the MPA can fit in their plans and how to develop a strategy plan to do that.

We are also focusing on the same issue at another scale throughout Chiloe Island, where we are conforming several of these round tables with different sectors of the society (fishermen, indigenous communities, tourism, among others) to finally conform a multi-sectorial group. Work was conducted in close coordination with local stakeholders, in the following areas: 1. Socio-political efforts; 2. Education efforts; 3. Community outreach.

In the socio-political grounds, the proposal to designate an MCPA for the Gulf of Corcovado and Chiloé successfully passed the required legal and administrative process in 2007. This included approvals by both the Regional Coastal Use Commissions of the 10th and 11th Regions. The final two steps required are approval by the National Coastal Use Commission and a decree by the Ministry of Defense. To date, these steps have been coordinated by the Marine Undersecretary. In August 2007, the proposal was brought to the National Coastal Use Commission where the government decided to postpone a vote and open additional unspecified consultation processes. Major political opposition to the MCPA surfaced at this meeting, led by the Ministry of Public Works. In addition, the national artisanal fishermen's organization, and two highly vocal NGOs (Centro de Conservación Cetacea and Ecoceanos), voiced opposition and created an image of overall opposition from this sector. In contrast, 13 NGOs had sent a written statement of conditional support for the MCPA designation, but this was not considered significant in the face of both high-level political opposition and the artisanal fishing sector. The major limitation now is that the MCPA proposal has become identified for some decision-makers as a conflictive arena. An important strength, on the other hand, is that the proposal has already passed through the regional stages of official and legal approval, and thus is the only MCPA proposal that continues to be in the running currently, and can be re-launched without starting from zero. In light of this situation we have re-evaluated the MCPA strategy. In our analysis a renewed effort must take into account a longer time horizon, and work toward establishment of the MCPA over the next 2-3 years with tangible milestones along the way.



Education efforts have consisted of workshops mainly directed to children and held during the entire field season, on three-hour sessions twice a week. Additional workshops were conducted occasionally. All the community was invited to participate through the local radio and street posters. Promoting awareness in children regarding the role of people (children, adults, and authorities) in environmental protection and about the impact of waste in urban and rural environments and in particular over the marine ecosystem; Teaching children basic concepts of waste management, recycling and reusing; Developing simple waste management techniques.

Outreach efforts were aimed at recreational activities and included the participation of CBA members in community activities. Activities conducted were very important to generate local trust and position the

CBA within the community. Since Melinka is one of the communities with the highest isolation rate in the country, there is little cultural outreach and residents often express such a need. An “Outdoors Movie and Documentary Cycle” using the multimedia projector purchased through Rufford Foundation’s grant, was carried out in several parts of the community. Based on this activity, a group of 10 Melinkan youngsters spontaneously and actively collaborated in the arrangement of each show, developing certain ownership of the activity. This led to a permanent discussion about the role of youth in community development.

The daily and systematic contact with the community, especially with grassroots leaders, lays the foundations for a relationship of trust. This is a key issue to plan and implement local development strategies for the community of Melinka through relevant joint actions with local stakeholders. This last issue is very important considering this community’s geographical situation. Additionally, now the BWC has community allies that give sustainability to the efforts it carries out in the area.



The 2008 field season started on 26 January in Melinka, Guaitecas Archipelago. To date, a total of 12 very successful marine surveys have been completed¹. We have been able to confirm once more the presence of blue whales (*Balaenoptera musculus*) in the area together with humpback whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*). Direct feeding of blue and humpback whales has been observed on a number of occasions among large swarms of krill (mostly comprised by *Euphausia valentini*).



A remarkable new occurrence has been the repeated sighting of a new species for the gulf of Corcovado, the sei whale (*Balaenoptera borealis*). These encounters have included mother calf pairs, suggesting the area is not only important for the previously observed species, but also for this notably pelagic animal. We have also been able to obtain a total of 18 biopsy samples (including skin and blubber) from blue, humpback and sei whales, furthering in this way on the buildup of a genetic and contaminant database on the whales of the Corcovado Gulf.

¹ Additional marine surveys have been undertaken, but few data has been obtained due to previously agreed commitments with press (ABC News & local newspapers) and other visitors such as the Ambassador of Australia.



Mother-calf pair of sei whale in the Corcovado Gulf (© R. Hucke-Gaete CBA/UACH 2008).

Marine debris has also been collected at sea and has been mostly comprised by large blocks of flotsam, plastic bags, synthetic ropes and plastic bottles.

All this research and its details will be included in the final RSGF report, and will provide additional input for a recently awarded project to Universidad Austral de Chile and CBA ("Research for developing a Marine Protected Area in Chiloe"). This project is funded through a IDB grant to the Chilean Government and administered by regional CONAMA (National Environmental Commission). This *ca.* US\$600,000 project will run for 25 months from January 2008 onwards and includes the development of biological, socio-economic and tourism baselines together with the formulation of a zoning proposal and management plan for the proposed MPA.



Blue whale surfacing (© R. Hucke-Gaete CBA/UACH 2008).