

**PROGRESS REPORT - September 2008**

**BLUE WHALES IN CHILE:  
THE GIANTS OF MARINE CONSERVATION**

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Continuing with the process of creating a new conservation strategy for the important Chilense ecoregion, we have been pursuing the participation of local communities and at the same time, continued scientific research to support any decision and in particular to provide information to understand and predict changes over one of the most iconic species of the world, the blue whale. This internationally well known area, one of the most biologically productive areas in South Pacific, has been highlighted by the discovery of the blue whales, made by the director of the Blue Whale Center (BWC) in 2004.

Since 2003 we have been working over austral summer months in the area, completing in 2008 the sixth research expedition. The 2008 field season started on 26 January in Melinka, Guaitecas Islands. A total of 31 very successful marine surveys were completed together with 334 hours of land-based observations on-effort. We have been able to confirm once more the presence of blue whales (*Balaenoptera musculus*) in the area together with humpback whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*). 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. 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 total of 170 blue whale sightings (including 241 individuals), 29 humpback whale sightings (including 40 animals) and 5 sei whale sightings (including 11 animals) were obtained. We were also able to obtain a total of 35 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. Marine debris was also collected at sea and has been mostly comprised by large blocks of flotsam, plastic bags, synthetic ropes and plastic bottles. Additionally, a total of 16 hours of acoustic recordings were made between January and April 2008, in the presence of 11 groups of blue whales, containing a total of 17 individuals. Of this, just over 6 hours contained blue whale vocalizations and 206 sounds were selected for analysis, giving an average call rate of 12.8 calls per hour.

The results from the 2008 field season, allowed us to produce three working papers presented at the Scientific Committee. The scientific meeting was attended by Dr. Hucke-Gaete as Invited Participant, and by Mr. Juan Pablo Torres and Mrs. Suzannah Buchan as local scientists pertaining

to BWC. In addition, Mr. Maximiliano Bello from CBA was appointed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as part of the official delegation attending the Commission meetings.

Considering the initial proposal for a Multiple Use Marine Protected Area has been frozen by the central government until more participatory activities are undertaken, we continue our work building alliances and agreements with local communities, creating a solid base for a new process in this territory. This new process is focused in generating a conservation strategy for the area, which possibly ends up proposing several marine protected areas, such as reserves, parks, or multiple uses areas or just a large Multiple Use Marine and Coastal Protected Area (MUMPA) as initially proposed. This new strategy aims at generating strong support from the local communities and stakeholders. They are the base of any intervention and the people who can work to maintain this process in the long term. We have been able to generate alliances and compromises with indigenous people (the Consejo de Caciques de Chiloé and the Federación de Comunidades Huilliches de la Isla de Chiloé), fishermen (the Provincial Council of Artisanal Fishermen of Chiloé (PCAFC)), other NGOs, local governments and consolidate a better presence throughout this territory and our proposal of sustainable development, using the blue whale not just as an iconic species to understand the importance of the area, but also to generate awareness on marine conservation issues and along Chile.

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) decided to push a CAP (Conservation Action Plan) for the Chiloense Ecoregion, an analysis never considered to the level of detail it is now developing into. In this context TNC called CBA, WWF, Conservación Marina NGOs to contribute to this process. Some of the outcomes will be a MARXAN analysis but also a pressures and threats analysis together with potential actions to be developed in the area. This process and plans are also connected with the project funded by the Inter-American Development Bank and granted by CONAMA Los Lagos, through the National Fund for Regional Development. This project was contracted to the Austral University of Chile (jointly with CBA personnel) during late 2007 (*ca.* USD \$600,000) and will allow us to prepare a whole conservation plan for the Ecoregion under the supervision of Dr. Hucke-Gaete. We are now preparing comprehensive socioeconomic, touristic and biological baselines for the area, under a general framework for ascertaining the best options for a conservation plan of the ecoregion.

Additionally, on May 21, 2008, Dr. R. Hucke-Gaete received recognition from the Whitley Fund for Nature. The project was awarded the Golden Award (main award), and was handed to him by HRH Princess Anne in a ceremony held in London. This is for sure, one of the most important international recognitions to conservation efforts throughout Europe and should be seen as a credit to the challenge that the BWC has conscientiously assumed to protect one of the most important marine environments in the Southern Hemisphere. The process we are leading is aiming at a broader impact, which is to give more recognition to governance and stewardship, and we believe this project can make a difference in terms of participation and in consolidating a marine protected area scheme as a valuable tool for local communities and in particular to fishermen, which are a very important sector in Chile.