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## WHALES OF THE WHITSUNDAYS STEERING COMMITTEE

### MEETING MINUTES

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Date: Monday 6<sup>th</sup> March 2023    Time: 10:30am    Venue: TW Boardroom

Item	
1	<p><b>Members Present:</b> Olivia Brodhurst, Crystal Lacey, Tony Fontes, Lindsay Simpson, Charlie Morgan, Roxanne Bowden, Deb Duggan</p> <p><b>Apologies:</b> Trevor Rees, Cass Hayward, Fred Nucifora, Aunty Agnes Boyd, Robert Congoo, Arpad Romandy, Ben Buchan, Brie Sherow, Cass Hayward, Heather Ewing, Katie Tuesley, Nicole Rosser, Renee Branton-Brow, Stuart Allwright,</p> <p><b>Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners:</b> Olivia Brodhurst – Olivia recognised the traditional owners of the Whitsundays the Ngaro, Gia &amp; Juru people.</p> <p><b>Acceptance of previous minutes and previous actions:</b> N/A for first meeting</p> <p><b>Membership Update:</b> Currently open to all. Please consider any missing stakeholders and share invitation to join. Youth involvement would be great.</p> <p><b>Actions from last meeting:</b> N/A</p>
2	<p><b>Introduction to Whales of the Whitsundays and the Whale Heritage Site Program – Presented by Olivia Brodhurst</b></p> <p>Purpose of this group is to be a steering committee for the project. Membership numbers haven't been capped at this stage, with the aim to bring new people in with new thoughts and vision to the table, and not have the same small group of people. It is a community project, fully transparent, anyone can join, sent minutes and nothing is off the table. The aim is to be a mobilising force to help deliver the project and achieve accreditation, and come together to get diverse representation.</p> <p>The aim is to also have a huge input from the Traditional Owners (TO's) into the project. TO's have indicated great interest, relating that in the region the TO's liked to watch the whales, and were their guardians; making sure they were healthy, calving etc. The TO's are keen to make sure they can still watch, get data, etc and are particularly interested in what happens if the whales are not ok, and what are the options if they aren't? For example, if someone hits a whale what happens? Or if we start to see disease or a decline in numbers, what are the options and we need to talk about it now before it happens.</p> <p>The steering committee has had a number of letters of support from Reef Catchments, Local Council, GBRMPA and form the World Cetacean Alliance. The project is going to the next Traditional Owner Reference Group meeting to garner their official support.</p>

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We have 4 species of dolphin and 6 species of whale recorded in the Atlas of living Australia or Eye on the Reef (EOTR) as being sighted in the region.

Another four species are found nearby but have not been sighted in the waters of Whitsundays. Some have been sighted both to the north and south of the region. These species include Fin and Sei whales. EOTR have added all cetacean species in the Whitsundays to the database but other nearby species need to be added to make it easier for people to enter sightings, maybe even first recorded sightings!

Points raised:

- Are we at carrying capacity for whales?
- Is it a healthy population now? We don't know if it is changing, how do we know?
- We need to make sure oceans are staying really healthy and mitigate climate change

Project drivers:

- Whales pump nutrients around our waters and have a great influence on phytoplankton. Phytoplankton absorb nearly a third of human generated carbon dioxide and therefore play a huge role in combating climate change.
- We know hardly anything about the whales that visit the region, impacts, populations etc
- Improve local connections and local knowledge
- Stewardship is a driver for sustainability
- If we don't monitor, we won't know if there are changes in their numbers
- Improve knowledge of local regulations, how to report if doing wrong thing
- Marketing benefits and ecotourism benefits

The Whale Heritage Site Program is run by World Cetacean Alliance (WCA)

- Currently 5 certified sites in the world and 14 candidate sites
- The Whitsundays are an approved Candidate site
- The Whitsundays are currently the only candidate site within the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park and only one within a World Heritage Area
- Program is quite unique, and WWF approached WCA to develop the same program for other animals.

Proposed area

- We are far advanced than island communities that do not have laws, managers etc
- Whitsundays Whale Protection Area already designated and It is propose to use this boundary as it is already mapped.
  - Tony – what about reef operators, what about expanding area? Cruise Whitsundays etc?
  - Crystal – talked about the Plan of Managements are being reviewed and there is potential for this to be incorporated. It is an ongoing accreditation and perhaps the area could be expanded in future years.

Once certified there is a \$3,000 USD annual fee. Do we seek grant funding? Operators benefiting to contribute?

Brainstorm ideas for Year 1:

- Form steering committee
- Presentations to WLMAC and others
- Pre and during whale season engagement campaign – species info, EOTR etc
- Develop acoustic sounding expertise locally - UQ to train to use hydrophones, they are maintaining a long term data base. They will provide equip for training (Olivia has applied for funding for one set for the Whitsundays, operators can purchase their own for around \$2.5k for hydrophone and recorder). Soundings training tentatively booked in for 15<sup>th</sup> July. To be conducted by UQ.

- Capture whale song - encourage operators to buy own equipment, play whale songs live. Take recordings and provide to UQ for research (population etc).
- Immersive whale song experience as part of reef festival – short tours
- Reef festival youth engagement activity at family fun day
- Sounds of Whitsundays whales webpage (try and put some not all up – some will have interpretive focus) champion operators who are a part of it, (another reason to head out with the operator)
- Developing monitoring program (citizen science focused) – EOTR, sounding, bit of research on dolphins, where are, key habitats etc, when, what other work etc. talking through what monitoring, what should do etc. Future for funding to do habitat assessment etc.
- Charlie – we have the potential to integrate with monitoring programs (dugong census, cots etc)
- Apply for accreditation at end of 2023

### 3 Group brainstorming session focusing on the 4 criteria of the Whale Heritage Site Program.

Criteria of the Whale Heritage Program: <https://whaleheritagesites.org/criteria/>

#### 1. Encouraging Respectful Human-Cetacean Coexistence

- 1.1 Guidelines and/or regulations related to the interactions between humans and cetaceans support international best practice and are appropriate to local context. Guidelines and/or regulations must be developed collaboratively by all of the key stakeholders, reviewed regularly, and clearly communicated to relevant audiences.
  - GBRMPA and WPOM set out the guidelines for whale watching.
- 1.2 Guidelines and/or regulations are monitored by a minimum of two authorities, one of which can be advisory, but the other should be a responsible government body authorised to take effective action. There should be a clear process for any breaches including consequences for offenders.
- 1.3 Regular training takes place for skippers, crew, guides, onshore staff, and other stakeholders to ensure ownership and maintenance of responsible standards for interactions.
- 1.4 A permit system exists that manages and limits licenses for cetacean interactions according to the best available local research and includes regular assessment and reapplication.
- 1.5 Mechanisms are in place to encourage ongoing reduction of environmental impacts in order to enhance the social and educational benefits from watching cetaceans.

WCA have provided some suggestions including reviewing guidelines collaboratively to ensure buy in and ensuring awareness/appropriate training.

Four of the five sub-criteria must be met.

The main points of discussion were that it would be great to produce a video for all to watch (operators / skippers) and play to guest on whales of the Whitsundays, why they are important and the guidelines for whale watching and also for a Skippers to be engaged in an event before whale season to discuss regulations and ensure everyone is trained on how to safely interact with whales with minimal impact. Training to be simple, suggest a package that can be delivered to the operators for them to implement, along with workshops run by MRG's. Points raised:

- Keep it simple
- Identify what is bad behaviour
- Explain what harassment actually does to the whales
- Link to website and EOTR provided in package
- Reporting system for incidents and non-compliance. Potentially incorporate to EOTR system, have a link for non-compliance to regulations (whale strike, harassment etc) where skippers can report anonymously if required.
- People need to know what the follow up is after a report of an incident. Maybe a statement from the Authority on how an incident is managed and reported.

- Could GBRMPA use VMR to respond to incidents? Reef Joint field management or fisheries? How does it work, so who does what if there is stranding
- Add incident reports to permits and review for re-issue of permits etc
- Hydrophones to measure sounds of vessels at speed and idling to educate vessel operators on importance of reduction of noise (jetskis not noisy underwater – again education)
- Package educational for marina guests as well
- Potentially GBRMPA to supply training package with input from steering committee.
- Do we run regular meetings to get skippers (or a representative from the business) together, to discuss issues and how do you comply with all the different vessels operating.
- 60% or more operators need to sign and understand regulations in place for Whale Heritage Site. How do we achieve sign off?
- Reef Islands Initiative to encourage research.
- PhD running through Reef Trust Partnership.

**Action:**

- **A Whales of the Whitsundays video to be produced**
- **Olivia and Crystal to discuss a video and skipper training with GBRMPA**

**2. Celebrating Cetaceans**

- 2.1 Wild cetaceans are reflected in culture through historical or contemporary practices that harness a greater appreciation for living cetaceans in their natural habitats.
- 2.2 Cetacean-related festivals, ceremonies, meetings or other events that encourage a sense of pride, heritage, history, sustainability, and legacy are held annually.
- 2.3 Cetacean-related works of art are created, including in music, dance, and theatre; the visual arts, and in literature, from both written and spoken traditions.

Two of the three sub-criteria must be met.

**Group discussion:**

- Highlight close cultural connections and association between cetaceans and people
- Incorporate cetaceans through activities and community
- Whales sounds and interpretation to nursing homes. Schools, child care centres, whale sounds CD to sell to raise money to fund project.
- Roxy - celebrating reef festival, protecting the reef workshop, educating crew workshop through CSM.
- Whale experience day, family fun day 10 – 2
- Lindsay - coffee table book of the whales of the Whitsundays, different species and photos.
- Kids book – Like Ella the turtle, with QR codes to songs, websites etc
- Cass - have a welcome to the whales ceremony / celebration each year
- Funding of Reef Discovery Centre, stories to be legitimate, use screen at sailing club.
- Collect photos from the community of whales to be put together into a large collage that is a whale
- Traditional owner reef projects – funding, empowering, online resources etc, pay TO's to do cultural ceremony in full dress. We need to inspire them to lead the activities/project
- Capture ideas that we want feedback from Traditional Owners and understand what they would like to participate in or deliver.

**Action:**

- **Olivia and Crystal to chat to TO's to understand what they would like to be involved in and if they would like to champion a Welcome Whales event.**

**3. Environmental Social and Economic Sustainability**

- 3.1 Economic sustainability – jobs created through cetaceans (tours/conservation/research) or indirect economic benefits (festivals, arts and culture)
- 3.2 Social Sustainability - local communities are recognised as key WHS stakeholders by:

- 3.2.1 Being given the opportunity to participate in decision-making at key stages.
- 3.2.2 Informed via press, social media or other means, about the Whale Heritage Site Candidacy and the rationale behind it.
- 3.2.3 Involved in preparing and maintaining the site for WHS status.
- 3.2.4 Engaged in educational and community outreach events that promote the WHS and the reasons for its existence.
- 3.3 Environmental sustainability - the marine and terrestrial ecosystems within the WHS must be maintained and preferably enhanced to support a thriving population of wild cetaceans
  - 3.3.1 Threats relevant to the primary cetacean habitat should be identified and an action plan developed to address those impacts within the control of local stakeholders.
  - 3.3.2 A range of measures to enhance general environmental sustainability should be undertaken.
- 3.4 Sustainable Destination Management

Sub-criteria 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3 must be met.

Group discussion:

- Jobs created through cetaceans or indirect economic benefits – eco tourism, run an extra whale day for operators. Acoustic trips?
- Social sustainability, community to be involved, open steering committee, education and communication throughout the project.
- Environmental sustainability – managed marine park, managed national parks, need to be on the journey to get better. Encourage users to think about all the threats to cetacean habitats and how to prevent impacts
- We need to meet the first three criteria (sustainable destination)

#### 4. Research, Education and Awareness

The WHS recipient has developed, and seeks to continually improve, its commitment towards research, education and awareness.

- 4.1 Companies and organisations involved with cetacean interactions incorporate conservation-directed science and research programmes.
- 4.2 Conservation-based cetacean research and policy is showcased within the site.
- 4.3 Educational programmes that focus on cetaceans are delivered to local communities.
- 4.4 Local sustainability initiatives benefitting the marine environment are showcased.

Three of the four sub-criteria must be met.

- Definitely need a package to educate as discussed in Criteria 1.
- WCA courses / manuals content to be reviewed
- Meet with GBRMPA to discuss how they could tie in
- Master Reef Guides, Healthy Heart Project, Eye on the Reef
- Research we do is shared, is to create educational awareness and continually improving
- Crystal – potential for something like the seagrass monitoring project – simplified educational hub to learn about whales – the response on this currently sits with Reef Catchments

#### General Business/Open Session:

5

Branding

- How should it be used? Branding pack of logos and Olivia to control it
- TW to be provided logos for regional marketing.
- Crystal – billboard? Maybe operators get branding if they are actively involved.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is a separate program for operators to get accredited however it is focused on whale watching tours. Olivia is looking into this further.</li> <li>• Operators – buy in/sponsorship. Sign up to accept regulations, receive branding all in one; to say you understand, or want to be a part of the sounding training days, etc</li> <li>• Need operators to buy equipment if they want to capture whale song long-term</li> <li>• An operator is required that will donate a boat for the day to run whale experiences. Then come to the sounding training FOC.</li> <li>• Roxy - Cruising the Whitsundays May event could be used as a chance for education.</li> <li>• Lindsay - Kurt Jenner is collecting data and whale songs on the east and west coast. Lindsay to ask him to join.</li> </ul> <p>Funding</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Olivia has applied for Engaging Science Grant funding</li> <li>• Heritage site funding available toward end of year</li> <li>• Any other ideas?</li> </ul> <p><b>Actions:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Olivia to provide candidacy logos to TW for use in regional marketing</b></li> <li>• <b>Lindsay to contact Kurt Jenner to ask him to join the committee</b></li> </ul>
8	<p><b>Actions Arising from the Meeting:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>A Whales of the Whitsundays video to be produced</b></li> <li>• <b>Olivia and Crystal to discuss a video and skipper training with GBRMPA</b></li> <li>• <b>Olivia and Crystal to chat to TO's to understand what they would like to be involved in and if they would like to champion a Welcome Whales event</b></li> <li>• <b>Olivia to provide candidacy logos to TW for use in regional marketing</b></li> <li>• <b>Lindsay to contact Kurt Jenner to ask him to join the committee</b></li> </ul>
10	<p><b>Meeting Closed at 12.00pm</b></p> <p>Next Meeting to be in about a month and online. Date to be sent out as a poll. Meeting to be outside of the school holidays.</p>