Santa Catarina Nursery Whale Heritage Area

Área de Patrimônio das Baleias

Action Plan

Plano de gestão

Garopaba. Santa Catarina, Brasil

FINAL Version - 13 October, 2025

This preliminary Action Plan was drawn up during the visit of the WCA Coordinator for Latin America and the Caribbean, consultant R.G. Pingaro, from 16 to 22 March 2025, in conjunction with the Steering Committee formed for the Santa Catarina Nursery Whale Heritage Area on the coast of Santa Catarina, Brazil (Sítio Patrimônio da Baleia no litoral de Santa Catarina, Brasil - PBSC). The Action Plan will be developed by the local stakeholders of the PBSC steering committee. It was based on formats used in international cetacean conservation plans (such as those in Australia, New Zealand, Península Valdés in Argentina, and the IWC Network of Whale Sanctuaries) and in accordance with the laws and objectives of the Right Whale Protected Area APA.

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Introduction

Whale Heritage Areas (WhaleHAs) are outstanding destinations where local communities celebrate, respect, and protect cetaceans and their habitats. Whale Heritage Areas are designated by the World Cetacean Alliance (WCA) and are also part of the broader Wildlife Heritage Areas Network, which was co-founded by World Animal Protection (WAP) and the World Cetacean Alliance.

Whale Heritage Areas promote truly responsible whale and dolphin watching, supporting and promoting tourism that is sensitive to the environment, the welfare of the animals involved and the livelihoods of local communities. They empower local communities by placing a strong emphasis on cultural and natural heritage, providing support and advice through the WCA Partnership and the wider Wildlife Heritage Areas Network.

The Whale Heritage Area process provides communities with a framework that enables collaboration between stakeholders who do not normally work together, resulting in new initiatives such as whale festivals, conservation projects, and campaign efforts.

For the travel industry, Whale Heritage Areas provide a clear marker to help identify and support sustainable practices. For tourists, Whale Heritage Areas offer an easy and transparent way to select responsible holiday destinations for whale and dolphin watching.

Being designated as a Whale Heritage Area can also provide economic support to a community as a result of increased international exposure, recognition, tourism, local opportunities, and investment.

By generating pride and income for the responsible protection of cetaceans and their habitats, Whale Heritage Areas will also facilitate climate resilience and generate mutual benefits for people and the place.

Santa Catarina Nursery Whale Heritage Area

The coastal area of southern and south-central Santa Catarina hosts one of the Atlantic's most important nurseries for the southern right whales (*Eubalaena australis*). Every year, between May and November, with a peak between July and November, adults migrate from feeding areas in the South Atlantic (e.g., South Georgia Islands) to shallow, mostly small, protected coves along the coast between Florianópolis and Laguna, where females give birth and nurse their calves. These coves, characterised by shallow waters, protected beaches and lateral banks, offer shelter from natural predators and favourable conditions for caring for newborns, making land-based observation from the coast and elevated points possible.

The area also has strong cultural value: Azorean-descendant communities, artisanal fishers and traditional practices such as cooperative fishing with dolphins in Laguna make up a cultural heritage linked to historical coexistence with cetaceans. The combination of ecological importance, cultural heritage and opportunities for low-impact, land-based whale watching tourism makes Santa Catarina a natural and unique candidate for integrated conservation and sustainable local development actions.

The main threats to cetaceans in this area include entanglement in fishing gear (especially gillnets), collisions with vessels, noise and disturbance from motorised vehicles (helicopters, jet skis), water pollution and alteration of the coastal landscape by occupation and artificial lighting that can disorient animals and reduce the quality of nursery areas. Current policies already restrict boat tourism in coves and establish rules for observation from a distance as fundamental protection measures.

Executive summary

This Action Plan guides the conservation of the Whale Heritage Area on the coast of Santa Catarina, Brasil, focusing on the protection of the southern right whale (*Eubalaena australis*) and other cetaceans. The area combines a critical habitat for reproduction and calf rearing with a valuable cultural heritage that includes the artisanal fishing community of the Azores and the longstanding cooperation between humans and dolphins in Laguna. Through responsible tourism based on land-based observation, the plan seeks to promote ecological regeneration, awareness and appreciation of heritage, and the well-being of local communities, including important alliances with the private sector, government institutions and civil society organisations in Santa Catarina (SC).

1. General objective

Establish a comprehensive framework for the conservation of cetaceans in Santa Catarina through environmental protection, strengthening community-based cultural heritage and traditional knowledge, organising responsible whale watching tourism on land, and raising awareness and appreciation for local knowledge for the benefit of coastal communities.

2. Legal and institutional framework

This plan is in line with international conventions and Brasilian regulations governing the conservation of cetaceans, the sustainable use of biodiversity and the protection of intangible cultural heritage. It includes liaison with local stakeholders, NGOs, fishing communities and the tourism sector.

3. Diagnosis of the area

3.1. Southern right whales in these waters

Southern right whales undertake seasonal migrations between high-latitude feeding grounds and temperate coastal areas for breeding and calving. In Santa Catarina, records show that the whales arrive in May, and typically remain until October, with the highest numbers between July and September, when calving and parental care occur. Females choose shallow, generally small and protected coves because these areas reduce the presence of predators, allow the mother and calf to remain close to the coast in calm waters, facilitate breastfeeding and reduce the energy cost of movement. For this reason, the coves and coastal banks of this region function as natural nurseries, essential for the survival of the young and for the population recovery of the species.

3.2. Whaling cultural heritage

For centuries, communities of Azorean descent settled in this region, developing a coastal whaling culture linked to traditional cetacean hunting. Today, this legacy has evolved into a model of active conservation and interpretive tourism, in which ancestral knowledge is a pillar of the heritage narrative. The old whaling farms, now restored as cultural centres, are a testament to this transformation.

3.3. Whale watching tourism in the area

Whale watching in Santa Catarina is done exclusively on land, from beaches, dunes, viewpoints and cliffs, which makes it a low-impact activity and in line with legislation that prohibits tourist boats in breeding coves. During the season, from May to November (with the highest concentration between July and September), visitors can safely observe Southern right whales without disturbing the mothers and calves.

This land-based model strengthens and supports the local economy, expands opportunities for environmental education and raises awareness about species conservation. Interpretative centres, community monitoring and local guides contribute to the quality of the experience and generate benefits for communities, provided that protocols of conduct and capacity limits at observation points are respected.

The Right Whale Environmental Protection Area (APA) exists to protect Southern right whales; regulate and ensure the rational use of the region's natural resources; regulate tourism and recreational use, research activities, and local boat and aircraft traffic. As the southern coast of Santa Catarina is one of the main sanctuaries for these whales in the world, making it a vulnerable area, the Right Whale Environmental Protection Area is fundamental for their conservation and right to reproduce in a territory that is safe for them and used sustainably.

3.4. Unique interaction between humans and dolphins in Laguna

Laguna is known worldwide for a unique form of interspecific cooperation: artisanal fishermen and bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*) actively collaborate in fishing for mullet (*Mugil cephalus*). This practice, recognised as intangible cultural heritage, represents a rare case of positive interaction between humans and cetaceans, where dolphins help push schools of fish towards the shore and fishermen cast their nets in sync with their signals.

3.5. Essential role of fishermen as natives of the territory

Artisanal fishermen are not only a source of local ecological knowledge, but also key players in marine conservation. They are guardians of the coastal landscape, early warning systems for threats, and fundamental allies in the transition to sustainable activities such as ecotourism and responsible fishing. The importance of working with fishermen in their territories prior to the whale season (before the mullet season: March-April), implies being able to raise awareness about whale protection, and empowerment that is integrated with the livelihood needs of communities.

4. Management strategies

4.1. Responsible tourism and the private sector

Objective: To consolidate a model of land-based whale watching tourism that generates local benefits, minimises impacts on whales and strengthens the community economy.

Actions:

- Encourage partnerships between community guides and private sector tour operators to develop whale and bird watching experiences on land, improve trails, historical routes and cultural tourism.

- Encourage partnerships with artisanal fishermen and raise awareness among the local community, including environmental education in schools and educational centres, highlighting the socio-cultural and economic benefits that whales bring.

- Certify or qualify tour operators with a ‘responsible tourism’ seal, which guarantees compliance with environmental standards, respect for communities and local economic contribution.

- Establish capacity limits and tourist shifts in high-demand locations (viewpoints, trails, cultural centres).

- Create integrated itineraries with local accommodation, traditional cuisine and interpretive spaces, and improve and design trails and produce educational signage.

- Support the development, strengthening and expansion of Cultural and Community-Based Tourism (CCBT) initiatives currently underway in the area, integrating land-based whale watching into this activity.

Suggested timeline: Short to medium term (1–3 years to implement the label; pilot partnerships within 1 year).

Monitoring and evaluation: Annual indicators: number of certified operators; % of tourism revenue that remains in the community; impact assessments by observers (satisfaction questionnaires and verification of compliance with standards).

4.2. Community engagement and living heritage

Objective: To enhance and integrate traditional knowledge and local culture into conservation practices and tourist experiences.

Actions:

- Document, disseminate, and protect practices such as dolphin fishing and orally transmitted knowledge about whale migration.

- Include descendants of Azorean whalers in interpretation centres, strengthening their role as heritage educators.

- Promote cultural memory workshops, oral storytelling and community festivals linked to the sea and whales.

- Support the organisation, fundraising, improvement, strengthening and expansion of the Welcome to the Whales Celebration, the largest multicultural festival focused on the environmental preservation of nature, whales and the Santa Catarina nursery.

- Measure the impact of the Festival in terms of number of participants, number of events within the festivities, number of stands and number of sponsors, as a way of monitoring cultural vitality and community engagement over time. (*WHA Criterion 1, Indicator 1.4*)

Suggested timeline: Ongoing. Start workshops and documentation in 6–12 months; training programmes in 1–2 years; annual monitoring of whale celebrations starting immediately.

Monitoring and evaluation: Number of people trained; presence of local content in exhibitions; local socioeconomic indicators (income generated by related activities); annual data set on whale celebrations (participants, events, stands, sponsors).

4.3. Participatory Governance

Objective: Strengthen an inclusive management committee that harmonises and balances local, scientific and institutional interests for decision-making and the implementation of the plan.

Actions:

- Expand the WHA Steering Committee to include representatives from:
    - Artisanal fishermen
    - Descendants of Azorean whalers
    - Responsible tour operators
    - Interpretative and cultural centres

- Create a network of ‘Heritage Guardians’: community stakeholders and local scientists trained to act as bridges between traditional knowledge and environmental management.

- Develop internal regulations and a meeting schedule for the Management Committee.

Suggested timeline: Short (6 to 12 months); one scheduled committee meeting every 3 months.

Monitoring and evaluation: Frequency of meetings; minutes of decisions made; level of participation (number of active members).

4.4. Financing and sustainability

Objective: Ensure stable funding and economic mechanisms that support the implementation of the plan, benefit communities, and preserve heritage.

Actions:

- Specific funds for the preservation of intangible cultural heritage (in coordination with IPHAN).

- Public-private partnerships for investments in sustainable tourism infrastructure. Participation of cooperatives and local businesses in the development of products with territorial identity (handicrafts, gastronomy, souvenirs with cultural and ecological narratives).

Suggested timeline: 1–3 years. 6 months to 1 year to establish funds and initial contracts.

Monitoring and evaluation: Operational fund created; number of new partnerships or agreements; investments in sustainable tourism infrastructure; number of participating local cooperatives and companies or products with territorial identity developed.

5. WhaleHA Steering Committee

In accordance with the requirements of the WhaleHA's designation process and action plan, a steering group was formed, composed of people from the local community whose professions and knowledge are very diverse and enriching.

Name and occupation	Organisation
1. Simone Poletto. Environmental educator.	TOB TERRA BIOCONSCIÊNCIA BALEIA AUSTRAL OKUN. COSTA CATARINA. AMA
2. Andrea Mierczynski. Educator and professor.	OKUN. NUS (Sustainability Centre).
3. Sergio Leite Guimaraes. Agricultural Engineer.	Amigos do Meio Ambiente para ecologia, desenvolvimento e turismo sustentável (AMA), TOB TERRA y COSTA CATARINA
4. Gabriela Lopez Fibeiro. Artisan. Environmental conductor/guide.	Coordinator: TOB TERRA y COSTA CATARINA
5. Luiz Enrique da Silva. Photographer.	Native of the fishing community.
6. Katiani Pinheiro Dos Santos. Designer. Local businesswoman.	Art gallery - Local Rancho 29.
7. “Luciano”. Tourism entrepreneur.	Owner of Pousada Ferrugem Da Colina Verde.
8. Rodrigo G. Pingaro. Consultant (Uruguay)	Environment and Climate Change Advisor