

2.4 The community recognises that there may be clashes of interests and values related to the protection of wildlife and has strategies in place to resolve them as fairly as possible.

The Whitsundays is an area that offers access for many different kinds of activities: Commercial and recreational fishing and boating, snorkelling and diving, sailing, watersports, conservation, and more attractions for locals and tourists. The actual area of where these activities take place is relatively small and we therefore understand that conflicts of use within the community are bound to arise. In regard to cetaceans specifically, the Whales of the Whitsunday Steering Committee recognises the conflict with the high-speed tourism industry and military operations practices that occur in the region.

We also recognise the conflict of priority. As Humpback whale numbers increase and eventually reach their carrying capacity, the occurrence of vessel strikes and strandings are also likely to increase. We, as a Steering Committee, need to understand, and need to help our community understand the differences in priority and non-priority events and we need to manage expectations in regard to response to these events.

We recently had a whale stranding on a local beach that unfortunately ended up dying. On one side we were thankful to the local community for being interested and offering help, but on the other we then had to manage their perceptions of the event and more importantly public safety. Many people expected there to be a large-scale rescue effort, but unfortunately the whale was very visually sick (lice) and there was very little hope for recovery. The area also needed to be managed for people as crocodiles and sharks are known to inhabit the area. Luckily, no large-scale burial or removal was needed as the tide took the whale out with it and moved it to a more secluded beach where nature was able to do its thing.

This sad event brought up a lot of questions for our community that need to be answered like if necropsies are viable, who would conduct it, who would pay for it, etc. It also taught us that we need to be prepared for these events becoming more common and how we can better manage the public and their perceptions along the way.

Luckily, we have a vast abundance of knowledge in the area and many of these voices are very involved in the community. The Whales of the Whitsunday (WoW) Steering Committee (the Committee) is made up of a range of people including scientists, tourism operators, community stakeholders and journalists. The Committee is in the process of creating a Terms of Reference to govern how it is conducted. The terms of reference will provide conflict resolution tools that are inclusive of all different stakeholders. We also want to ensure there are methods in place to ensure high powered individuals cannot dominate the decision-making processes. A well-written terms of reference will ensure harmony and wider consensus within the community.

Normally, the Committee can find an easy resolution for conflicts. For example, at the July Steering Committee meeting, concern was raised over pictures and videos being posted on the Whales of the Whitsunday Facebook page that appeared to be breaking the rules and regulations of approaching whales. Members concluded that making the rules and regulations a featured post, commenting on media that potentially broke the rules asking them if it was taken within these regulations, and to make it a group rule that new posts must include information on how the media was taken. We also wanted to make sure there was no shaming happening, as whales are known to regularly pop up without warning, so it is best to presume people are following the rules unless told otherwise (July minutes attached).

At the August Steering Committee meeting, members had some disagreement about how to proceed with a potential article on the topic of whale strikes this season. As we don't yet have an active Terms of Reference, we came to a consensus as a group that the best way to proceed was to have the Steering Committee review the article before publication to ensure it aligned with our goal as a group to be a safe place where people feel comfortable coming for advice and education, and not coming from a place of judgement. We all feel very strong connections to the whales, but understand that: a. People make mistakes, mostly out of ignorance, and b. Even when you do everything within the rules and regulations, accidents can happen. We spoke about how we can do better at disseminating the information and what we can do in the coming years to further mitigate these events (August minutes with actions attached).

We are lucky in the Whitsundays to have very strong women in the industry. Our Steering Committee has a majority women membership, with the chair and secretary both being women. We also have Traditional Owner representation within the group, and we are always open and interested in increasing involvement with under-represented groups. There is no limit on who can join the Committee at this stage and we are open to new people participating in any way they like. This is the advantage of being a community driven committee.