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The Arabian Sea Whale Network: A brief progress report

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INTERNATIONAL
WHALING COMMISSION

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As reported in a working paper to the 2015 meeting of the SH subcommittee, the Arabian Sea Whale Network (ASWN) was formed at the conclusion of a January 2015 workshop in Dubai. The Network has no formal legal status or governmental recognition but has a [website](#) and logo, intended to create a sense of unified purpose and facilitate communication, fund-raising, collaborative research and data management and analysis. [Members](#) include independent researchers, researchers linked with academic institutions, and representatives of local, national and international NGO's, IGO's and government bodies. The May 2016 newsletter that accompanies this For Info document provides the most up-to-date insight into members' activities and contributions to the network.

During the 2015 workshop, ASWN members agreed on a number of priority recommendations, which were listed in the executive summary of the [workshop report](#) (not necessarily in order of priority). The following table measures the progress that has been made against each recommendation, and highlights gaps where continued effort and funding are required to achieve the network's goals:

Recommendation	Progress as of May 2016
1. Form an Arabian Sea Humpback Whale Research Network: To include development of a mission statement and objectives and a clear set of conservation- and research-related roles for the members	The ASWN is fully functioning and engaged in frequent and fruitful exchange. Members have agreed to take on volunteer roles as needed and limited funding from EWS –WWF UAE supports a short-term contract for a part-time coordinator role, but more funding is required to sustain this.
2. Identify a focal point in each ASHW range state responsible for liaising with the network coordination team and for 1) verification and documentation of all ASHW stranding and sighting reports, 2) working with local communities, coastguards and others to collect data opportunistically and 3) assistance in drafting funding proposals and research plans for country-based or cross-border priority areas	Focal points in most ASHW range states are documenting strandings and sightings, working with local communities, assisting with funding proposals and obtaining their own funding to work toward cetacean research and conservation goals - as evidenced by contributions to this newsletter.
3. Develop a common (web-based) platform for sharing documents, data and research protocols among network members. To include, if possible, a regional Photo-ID matching platform.	The creators of Flukebook have agreed to work with the ASWN to create a tailor-made online data archiving tool. Funding is required to implement this and we are currently waiting to hear the outcome of various funding applications that have been made.
4. Establish data-sharing agreements for any web-based/group-wide data repositories, and memoranda of understanding between partners who embark on shared analyses to ensure proper data ownership and publication rights.	Models for data-sharing agreements exist, and will be called into play when the online platform has been developed. Many members are already freely sharing stranding and sighting reports and have indicated interest in data-sharing and collaboration on a wider scale.
5. Produce a "glossy" presentation of ASHW background and conservation concerns that network partners can use to raise awareness and attract funding.	WWF-Pakistan has allocated funding to this effort and is working with a designer to fine-tune a glossy "infographic" that can be used with stakeholders and potential funders. This needs to be finalized as soon as possible.
6. Engage in dedicated fund-raising efforts to support network coordination and research activities at both national	Funding is being sought both at regional and national level.

and regional scales.	More details provided below.
7. Implement regional research activities that include passive acoustic monitoring at strategic locations, dedicated boat surveys for genetic sampling, photo-Identification and collecting data on distribution and numbers, and further analyses of acoustic and genetic data already obtained from Oman and other locations.	Research activities to date are all being implemented at national/local level, with members doing a great job of conducting boat surveys and work with fishing communities. Funding has been obtained for broad analysis of genetic and acoustic data from Oman and initial results will be presented at this meeting. Funding is still required for more extensive regional acoustic work.
8. Create a common pool of equipment and other resources that can be used for research and analysis in different range states as required	WWF Pakistan has offered a boat to the research team in Iran, but has not yet been delivered.
9. Encourage Master's and PhD candidates from range states to conduct research and conservation work on ASHWs.	A strong team of students is working in India, and a focal point in Pakistan is working in a university setting that allows him to take on students. Funding is required to support research that can be conducted by students in range states.
10. Execute a large-scale GIS exercise - mapping all known/confirmed ASHW sightings (with effort indices when available) and strandings for analysis of spatial/temporal trends, as well as overlap with known threats (e.g. shipping lanes, high-density fisheries that use gillnets or vertical lines, oil and gas exploration and development sites).	Elements of this have been initiated as part of a PhD project in Oman, and through a separate regional review of strandings. This should be a reiterative exercise that adds new layers as data continues to be collected in range states, and will be greatly facilitated by the online regional data archiving platform.
11. Maintain liaisons with international and inter-governmental organisations that can support the network's aims and objectives and ensure that network findings/results are applied toward regional and international management and conservation frameworks.	The network coordinators maintain regular contacts with representatives from IUCN, IWC, CMS and the head offices of international NGO's like WWF and WCS.

Overall, this table, and the following newsletter show that the network is achieving its main goal of promoting information exchange and communication between researchers and conservation stakeholders in the region. Reports submitted to the SH subcommittee on work in Oman and India should also demonstrate progress on scientific research toward understanding (humpback) whale distribution and conservation status in those countries. On the whole, network members are doing an excellent job of raising funds for their own local or national research projects, and incorporating ASWN goals into these.

Where progress and results are lacking, it is due primarily to a lack of funding at regional level. The network has prioritized funding for the development of a regional online data archiving (and eventually data sharing) platform, based on Flukebook, and has secured agreements with the developers of Wildbook and Flukebook for this project. However, substantial funding is required to drive this project, and while two grant applications are still outstanding, other network led funding applications have not been successful.

The Network would like to ask for endorsement from the IWC of the following recommendations:

- The design and implementation of a regional online data platform based on Flukebook/Wildbook and using relevant elements of other existing platforms, such as the IWC and SORP databases. This will allow researchers in the network to store and analyse data in the same format, and facilitate regional collaboration on data analyses for evidence-based conservation management.
- The implementation of a region-wide passive acoustic study to detect (possible) presence of humpback whales in previously unstudied but suspected ASHW habitats off the coasts of Iran and Pakistan;

- Regional training workshops to allow expansion and replication of fisheries (bycatch) observer schemes;
- Increased use of platforms of opportunity, such as fishing or coast-guard vessels, ferries, etc. for documentation of cetacean sightings (either through training of vessel personnel, or placement of trained on-board observers);
- Analysis of the existing genetic samples collected in the region –as well as continued targeted genetic sampling in countries where it is possible;

The authors welcome any support or advice that other SC members have to offer with regards to funding strategies.