



**Action Plan for the Conservation of Marine Mammals (MMAP)
in the Wider Caribbean Region**

**STATUS OF PROTECTION OF MARINE MAMMALS IN THE
WIDER CARIBBEAN REGION**

The Specially Protected Areas and Wildlife (SPA) Protocol, born out of the Convention for the Protection and Development of the Marine Environment of the Wider Caribbean Region (Cartagena Convention), came into force in 2000 and is the only regional biodiversity legal agreement for the advancement of the conservation and protection of the marine environment in the Wider Caribbean Region (WCR).

All the species of the WCR listed in Annex II of the SPA Protocol are considered to be threatened or endangered species and their capture, take or possession is prohibited, unless for traditional use to satisfy cultural and subsistence needs. The SPA Protocol calls for the development and implementation of conservation, recovery or management programmes, as well as guidelines and criteria for the management of protected species.

In this context, governments have developed the **Action Plan for the Conservation of Marine Mammals (MMAP)** in the Wider Caribbean Region. The MMAP includes a 5-Year Priority Plan which considers the status of marine mammal conservation in the region, outlines main issues for consideration and proposes operational priorities for action together with a detailed timetable (<http://www.cep.unep.org/publications-and-resources/marine-and-coastal-issues-links/marine-mammals>).

OBJECTIVES

With at least 32 species of marine mammals documented in the region, including baleen whales, toothed whales, sirenians and pinnipeds, the MMAP was designed to help participating governments develop and improve marine mammal conservation policies and practices and to increase knowledge on species, their status and distribution. The MMAP was developed to provide a framework for activities at the national level through regional and international cooperation, while respecting the sovereign rights of participating governments. Its objectives are:

- Conservation and recovery of all marine mammal species and populations and protection of their habitats in the region; and the
- Establishment of regional cooperation programmes to increase scientific, technical, and educational exchange among relevant national, regional and international organizations.

In order to meet these objectives the Action Plan focuses on the management of human interactions and use, as well as species protection. This is done through increased scientific knowledge, increased public awareness, the development of protective measures and policies and the improvement of relevant laws.

ISSUES

The MMAP aims to address the following issues relevant to marine conservation in the Wider Caribbean:

Fisheries interactions

Some fisheries may intentionally target marine mammals to, for example, use them as bait. Although usually small scale, artisanal intentional fisheries sometimes include species for which the data needed to assess population status are almost non-existent. Mortality or serious injury can also occur due to accidental capture in fishing gear.

Habitat degradation from coastal and watershed development

Their habitat is degraded and lost in a variety of ways (urbanization, coastal tourism development, etc), making marine mammals particularly vulnerable. This can affect marine mammals by reducing their feeding zones, deteriorating water quality and diminishing suitable areas for breeding and reproduction. Most species suffer from multiple stressors (cumulative or synergistic effects), such as harassment in breeding areas and encroachments on foraging habitat.

Pollution and marine mammal health

Near shore environments are exposed to a wide range of pollutants and nutrients from both marine and land-based sources, including port, industrial and agricultural activities. Exposure to contaminants can increase susceptibility to disease and adversely affect reproduction.

Vessel strikes

Manatees and other marine mammals are vulnerable to vessel strikes, which can cause injury and death.

Marine mammals in captivity

Capture and removal of live marine mammals from the wild affects their ability to maintain natural populations. Removal also can cause stress or even death.

Acoustic disturbance/underwater noise

Noise from commercial shipping and transportation, oil and gas exploration and exploitation, military operations, dredging and coastal construction, fishing and recreational

activities degrade habitat and can affect the health, behavior, and distribution of marine mammals.

Marine mammal watching in the wild

If not managed and monitored properly, marine mammal tourist related activities (e.g. whale watching) can actually disturb marine mammal populations through noise (acoustics), touching and other interactions. These activities may disrupt their reproductive and behavioural patterns.

Climate change

Climate change is a complex, analytically challenging issue. Although the potential effects on marine mammals are speculative at this stage, the topic requires immediate attention and concern.

Protected Areas

The designation of protected areas can help regulate/exclude human activities that may negatively impact marine mammal species. They may also be used as control sites for scientific research and comparative analyses.

Research

Research is essential to the development of conservation, recovery and management plans for both species and ecosystems. The MMAP stresses the use of non-lethal research methods and monitoring through direct observations. Socioeconomic research is also encouraged in order to show how local communities can benefit from marine mammal conservation.

Data from marine mammal strandings can help provide scientists with information on pollution, disease, fisheries interactions, acoustic disturbance and vessel strikes. Tissue samples, for example can help monitor the levels of pollutants that may be found in marine mammal populations.



Stranded sperm whale in St. Thomas, Jamaica

ACTIVITIES

In order to facilitate the implementation of activities under the MMAP the SPAW Programme provides support to governments in the following areas:

- Assessment and maintenance of information on the status, distribution, abundance, and threats to marine mammal species and populations in the region;
- Response to marine mammal stranding events and strengthening of local networks able to help respond to strandings;
- Non-lethal and sustainable marine mammal economic activities, such as marine mammal watching;
- Mitigation of human-related threats to marine mammals;
- Protection of habitats in the WCR that are 'significant' to marine mammals;
- Enhanced understanding of the biology of all marine mammals, especially those that are threatened currently or that have been ,or are being affected by human activities;
- Addressing risks and uncertainty when making decisions, and ensuring that a precautionary approach is taken; and
- Addressing priorities for the conservation and recovery of the West Indian manatee in range countries.



West Indian Manatee

For additional information, visit the CEP website at www.cep.unep.org or contact:

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