

Editor's Comments

This edition of *Aquatic Mammals* is dedicated to the conservation of marine and aquatic mammals around the world. It was requested and organized by the members of the Species Survival Commission of the World Conservation Union. Substantial support for its preparation and publication has been generously provided by a grant from the Ocean Park Conservation Foundation of Hong Kong.

Note from the Chair of the Species Survival Commission

The seas, rivers, and inland waters of the earth have not been respected as the well-springs of life that they are. In part this is because of ignorance, and the following collection of papers is meant to improve our understanding of the conservation status of mammalian flagship species of the aquatic realm. Because humans are not adapted to an aquatic life, we shall always be poorly equipped to appreciate the environment in which these creatures exist and indeed the creatures themselves. Information at even basic levels is still too scarce, as witness the circumstances of the otters. Until the IUCN/SSC Conservation Action Plan was published, there was no single source illustrating the otter species and their geographic ranges. And, at the level of ecological roles and niches of the aquatic mammals we are woefully in want of more information. We know these creatures are top predators or herbivores, but it is difficult to gauge the nature and quantity of their relationships in biological communities so diffuse and extensive as those in the aquatic realm.

Why should we care about these animals in particular? There are many reasons—ecological, economic, ethical, and cultural, and each deserves an essay. From a biologist's standpoint, perhaps the most compelling reason is that they represent a marvellous set of evolutionary ventures—returns to the aquatic environment of forms close to our own. In this view, simply from the basic human drive to know, we need them as indicators of evolutionary health, as sustainers of local economies, and as icons of culture. Perhaps it comes down to our needing them as companions in a watery realm that makes up most of our planet's livable space. This collection of papers is testimony to our collective concern that these creatures continue to exist and thrive, whatever our needs of them. I commend to you this special issue of *Aquatic Mammals*.

George Rabb
Chair
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Note from the Guest Co-Editors

In 1993, the Program Committee of the Society for Marine Mammalogy decided that at its Tenth Biennial Conference, in Galveston, Texas, the membership should be updated on the conservation status of marine and aquatic mammals. Accordingly, representatives of five taxon-based specialist groups of the World Conservation Union's (IUCN) Species Survival Commission were invited to make presentations during the opening session, 12 November 1993. They were asked to summarize the major conservation problems and the most important steps being taken to address those problems. The present volume contains revised and in some cases expanded versions of the papers presented. Giuseppe Notarbartolo di Sciara discussed small cetaceans in marine waters based on information presented in detail in *Dolphins, Porpoises, and Whales*, which was published by IUCN in 1994. Peter Reijnders and David Lavigne, representing the Seal Specialist Group, summarized the status of pinniped conservation at Galveston but were unable to meet the publication deadline, so their papers are not included here. Readers are, however, encouraged to consult the pinniped group's Action Plan, *Seals, Fur Seals, Sea Lions, and Walrus*, which was published by IUCN in 1993.

The World Conservation Union was formerly known as the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources. The widely known initials, IUCN, have been retained for ease of recognition. IUCN is a union of 68 sovereign states, 99 governmental agencies and 598 non-governmental organizations (a total of more than 800 including affiliate members). It is one of a very few international conservation organizations whose membership includes representatives of both governmental and non-governmental organizations. IUCN seeks to provide a neutral forum where members can openly discuss problems and seek solutions. It then helps to form and facilitate the work of partnerships among governments and conservation organizations, especially locally and regionally.

Simply stated, IUCN's three main goals are: (1) to secure the conservation of nature, and especially biodiversity, as an essential foundation for the future, (2) to ensure that where the earth's natural resources are used, this is done in a wise, equitable and sustainable way and (3) to guide development of human communities towards ways of life that are both of good quality and in enduring harmony with other components of the biosphere.

Details of how IUCN is organized and works towards these goals are presented in *IUCN—The World Conservation Union Annual Report 1993* (Rue Mauverney 29, CH-1196 Gland, Switzerland). For present purposes, it is enough to say that at triennial General Assembly meetings the members agree on a single, integrated program. This program is then implemented by the Secretariat through the members, partners, collaborating agencies, consultants, and a network of about 6000 volunteers on six standing Commissions.

By far the largest of these Commissions is the Species Survival Commission or SSC, which includes some 5000 volunteer scientists, government officials and conservation leaders from 169 countries. These volunteers provide expert counsel on biodiversity conservation projects throughout the world. The SSC works primarily through its 100 specialist groups, most of which represent plant or animal taxa that are threatened with extinction or are otherwise of special interest to human welfare. A few groups are interdisciplinary and focus on such issues as veterinary medicine, reintroductions, sustainable use of wildlife, trade and captive breeding.

The SSC's goal is to help conserve biological diversity. It works primarily through the specialist groups to develop and execute programs that preserve, restore and wisely manage populations and habitats. Many of the specialist groups organize their activities on the basis of action plans, which establish priorities and identify the steps that must be taken to ensure the survival of species and populations. All the specialist groups provide technical information and advice on a wide variety of topics, such as the terms of international treaties, especially those to regulate trade in endangered and threatened species, the listing of species in the *Red Data Books*, and the conservation implications of new developments in fisheries and other maritime activities. They also help formulate policy recommendations concerning sustainable use and reintroduction or restocking of plants and animals in their native habitat.

The five specialist groups that are directly concerned with the conservation of marine and fully aquatic mammals include a total of 227 members. Each of the groups has a mission to prevent the extirpation of stocks and extinction of species on a global basis. By most recent count of the living species, there are 79 cetaceans, 34 pinnipeds, and 4 sirenians. The Otter Specialist Group deals with 13 species worldwide, of which two live entirely in the marine environment. Its close association with the sea and with other sea mammals gives the polar bear a unique position among the ursids, so it has its own specialist group.

This diverse group of mammals is represented in virtually every ocean and sea as well as in certain freshwater rivers and lakes on five continents. Marine and aquatic mammals pay no attention to human-defined boundaries. Many range freely across the borders dividing nations as well as into the unclaimed open sea. Even those species or subspecies that are distributed exclusively within the territory of a single country, such as the Baikal seal in Russia, the vaquita in Mexico, and the baiji in the People's Republic of China, are affected, often critically, by political and economic processes outside their home country. Therefore, any plan for conserving marine and aquatic mammals as integral elements of healthy ecosystems must be firmly rooted in international agreement and cooperation.

It is also clear that if programs to conserve marine and aquatic mammals are to work in the long term, they will have to be conceived and implemented with appropriate consideration for the economic, social and spiritual needs of people. Achieving a genuine sense of partnership and cooperation among diverse individuals, communities, nations and regions is, perhaps, our greatest challenge. We must learn to share the planet's resources more equitably, while also sharing the sacrifices required for conservation.

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