



Ocean

South Atlantic Whale Sanctuary

The International Whaling Commission offers a lifeline to protect whales and marine biodiversity

September 2024



Introduction

In September 2024, the 69th meeting of the International Whaling Commission (IWC69) will be held in Lima, Peru. Decisions taken at this meeting will have far-reaching consequences for the conservation of cetacean species, one-quarter of which are already threatened with extinction.¹

Marine and freshwater environments critical for cetacean survival are under increasing pressure from climate change and other threats such as overfishing and bycatch, noise and chemical pollution. In 2023, temperatures soared to the highest ever recorded, at 1.18°C above the 20th century average.² The 10 highest annual maximum global daily temperatures of the past 50 years have all occurred in the past decade, with 22 July 2024 recorded as the hottest on record.³

The average sea surface temperatures (SST) in June 2024 over 60°S–60°N was 20.85°C, the highest value on record for the month, for the 15th month in a row.⁴ With increasing ocean impacts resulting from the changing climate,

cetaceans face habitat loss, prey availability shifts, reductions in reproduction, shifts in migration and distribution and an increasing risk of pathogen occurrence in addition to other human-induced pressures.⁵

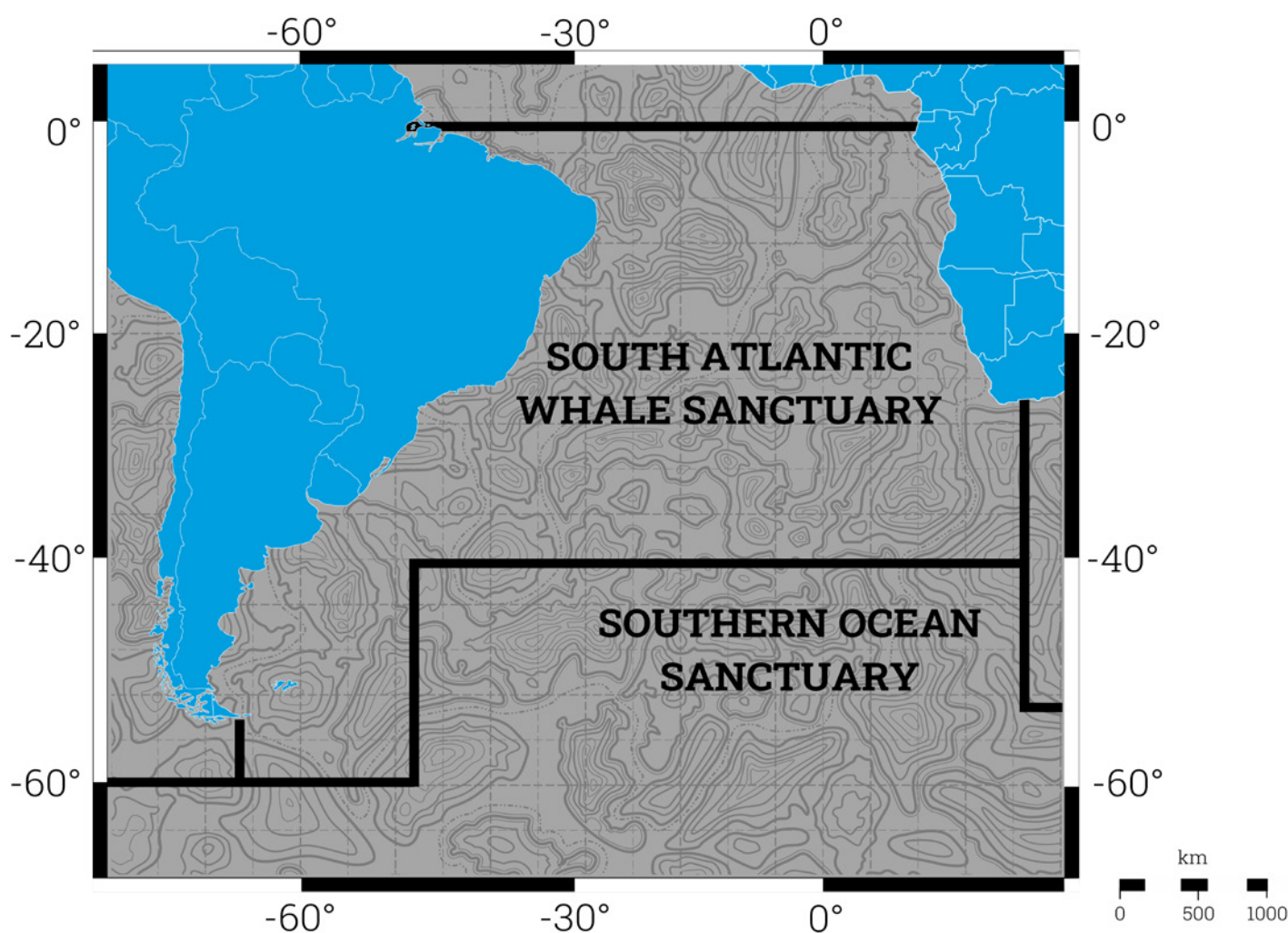
At the same time, the valuable role of the IWC in the 21st century, as per the Florianópolis Declaration, adopted in 2018, includes " ... its responsibility to ensure the recovery of cetacean populations to their pre-industrial levels".⁶

It is therefore more important than ever to protect as far as possible large areas of critical cetacean habitats. In this context, the proposal for a whale sanctuary in the South Atlantic, which has been tabled since 1998 but has as yet failed to obtain the necessary majority vote, provides a critical tool for the IWC to continue and build upon its vital conservation work.

The IWC, as the only global body with a mandate for the management and conservation of whales, offers an important forum for countries bordering the South Atlantic to realise the positive benefits that further whale conservation could bring to the region.

A proposed South Atlantic Whale Sanctuary

The proposed Schedule Amendment to create a South Atlantic Whale Sanctuary (SAWS) has been presented by the governments of Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay.⁷ The proposal aims to "promote the biodiversity, conservation and non-lethal utilization of whale resources in the South Atlantic Ocean."⁸



The IWC plays an important global role, having been instrumental in the designation of the world's largest existing sanctuaries. In 1979, the IWC created the Indian Ocean Sanctuary, an area covering nearly 10 million km², based on a proposal by the Seychelles. The Southern Ocean Sanctuary, adopted in 1994, and estimated to cover 50 million km², celebrates its 30th anniversary this year and an expert review submitted to the IWC Scientific Committee has demonstrated the ongoing value of this designation.

The proposed SAWS is in the region of the South Atlantic Ocean identified in Figure 1, approximately 21 million km² in size and reaching the boundaries of the IWC Indian Ocean and Southern Ocean Sanctuaries.

The SAWS stretches from the equator to the border of the current Southern Ocean Sanctuary, encompassing critical breeding grounds, feeding areas and migratory passages for more than 51 cetacean species such as blue, fin, sei, humpback, southern right, minke whales, pygmy right whales, Bryde's and sperm whales.

The SAWS was first discussed by the IWC in 1998 when the Government of Brazil stated its intention to put forward a proposal for the establishment of a whale sanctuary in the South Atlantic. The proposal was first evaluated by the IWC in 2001 and has been submitted repeatedly, with co-sponsors including the Governments of Argentina, South Africa, Uruguay and Gabon,¹¹ but has never achieved the 75 per cent vote required for its establishment.

“What we need, using a precautionary approach, is to use the tool of spatial protection to conserve sufficiently large areas which include cetacean critical habitats as well as the areas that we believe may have such conditions so that we can ensure that the options for future conservation are left open.”¹²

Erich Hoyt, author of Marine Protected Areas for Whales, Dolphins and Porpoises



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Above: Minke whale close-up feeding at surface

Key benefits to whales and the regions

Adoption of the SAWS is expected to benefit cetaceans and to bring multiple benefits to range states and those near its boundaries by recovering, maintaining or increasing cetacean populations. Some key benefits of a Sanctuary designation may include:

- stimulating collaborative research to improve knowledge of the cetacean populations throughout the region, to boost scientific capacity and regional marine knowledge, where the Southern Ocean Sanctuary Review demonstrated that the existing Southern Ocean and contiguous Indian Ocean Sanctuaries have allowed for the “conduit of scientific research useful for meeting IWC objectives”¹³
- providing a framework to coordinate conservation initiatives such as reducing fishing gear entanglements and addressing illegal killing of cetaceans, as laid out in the Management Plan provided in the background information to the proposed Schedule Amendment¹⁴
- supporting sustainable marine wildlife-watching and ecotourism growth in coastal communities in the regions of West and Central Africa and Latin America, where whale watching has the power to bring significant sustainable revenues into nearby communities¹⁵
- raising awareness, enhancing the region's status as a marine biodiversity destination, a key action of the proposed Management Plan¹⁶
- complementary to, and helping fulfil, existing marine biodiversity agreements, as has been demonstrated with the Southern Ocean Sanctuary¹⁷
- offering potential for technical and financial capacity to help meet these goals by providing access to IWC Scientific Committee members and funding from sources that favour and encourage marine spatial protection.

As an added layer of protection, the SAWS can help enhance recovery of whale populations exploited in the South Atlantic through implementation of the proposed Management Plan.

As a major wildlife attraction, whales and dolphins can boost coastal economies, with many South Atlantic countries showing great potential for further ecotourism growth, including responsible whale and dolphin watching. Proposed awareness-raising activities included in the SAWS Management Plan could further improve the region's profile as a marine biodiversity destination.

Cetaceans have intrinsic value in themselves and they have a wider value in conserving whole ecosystems. The recovery of cetacean populations would bring favourable ecosystem benefits, where healthy cetacean populations play a vital biological contribution to ecosystem functioning and their associated ecological, environmental, economic and social values.¹⁸

The adoption of SAWS and an associated Management Plan would complement the Convention for the Conservation of Migratory Species (CMS) Resolution 12.17, on the Conservation and Management of whales and their habitats in the South Atlantic region, and particularly the Action Plan, adopted by Parties at its 12th meeting and covering the same area.¹⁹ It would help achieve conservation goals and commitments under key international fora, including the Sustainable Development Goals, Convention on Biological Diversity and UN Regional Seas programmes.

Recommendations for IWC69

A primary tool for the conservation of marine species and the maintenance of ecosystem processes is the establishment of spatial protection, therefore adoption of the SAWS will support the IWC in these efforts.

The position taken by IWC members is critical in ensuring the IWC can take bold steps to meet conservation challenges. To this end, we encourage IWC members to:

- support the Schedule Amendment for the establishment of the South Atlantic Whale Sanctuary, including through co-sponsorship
- support the IWC's work to address anthropogenic pressures on cetaceans, including in the South Atlantic, such as climate change, bycatch and marine plastic pollution
- reject Resolutions that undermine the conservation of whales, dolphins and porpoises.

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