

## Capture and export of dolphins in the Solomon Islands: 2003 and 2007

Dear Sir: As you will recall, the IUCN/SSC Cetacean Specialist Group (CSG) became aware of and expressed concerned about a large-scale live-capture-for-export of dolphins in the Solomon Islands in July 2003. At the invitation of Nelson K. Kile, then Minister for Fisheries and Marine Resources, and Moses Biliki, then Director of Environment, Ministry of Environment, a small team of marine mammal experts visited the Solomon Islands between 9-12 September 2003 on behalf of the Cetacean Specialist Group and Veterinary Specialist Group of IUCN (CSG/VSG). The CSG/VSG team visited dolphin holding pens in two localities, Honiara and Gavutu, and met with staff of the Solomon Islands Marine Mammal Education Centre (SIMMEC), which oversaw the capture, holding and subsequent export of dolphins.

The vulnerability of local island dolphin populations to large-scale removals means that accurate information on the numbers taken, and on the locations of the hunts, is essential for appropriate management. The CSG/VSG team identified the majority of the 41 dolphins it observed in holding pens as Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphins, *Tursiops aduncus*, which are coastal in most of their range. At the time, no information on the locality of the hunts was provided, information was scant on the numbers taken (up to 100), and no abundance estimates for cetaceans in the Solomon Islands existed.

Based on the observations of the CSG/VSG team, and a fruitless search for relevant literature on cetaceans around the Solomon Islands, we concluded in our site-visit report that “No scientific assessment of the population-level effects of the removals of bottlenose dolphins in the Solomon Islands was undertaken in advance of the recent live-capture operations.” Accordingly, we advised that, “Without any reliable data on numbers and population structure of bottlenose dolphins in this region, it is impossible to make a credible judgment about the impacts of this level of exploitation.”

Noting that the Solomon Islands were not a Party to CITES in 2003, but that Parties may import from nonParties upon presentation of export documents issued by a competent authority that “substantially conform” to CITES requirements (in this case, Article IV), our primary interest was the scientific basis of any determination that the export would not cause detriment to the

survival of the species. Based on the lack of data available, we concluded:

*“Until such data are available, a non-detriment finding necessary under CITES Article IV is not possible. Therefore CITES Parties should not issue permits to import dolphins from the Solomon Islands. Unfortunately, this episode of live-capture was undertaken with little or no serious investment in assessing the conservation implications for the affected dolphin population(s).”*

As you will recall, 28 of the dolphins were exported later in 2003 to Mexico. No further exports took place and we are not aware of the fate of the remaining dolphins. However, we understand that the government of the Solomon Islands adopted legislation in 2005 banning further exports of dolphins.

We were pleased to learn earlier this year that the Solomon Islands had signed CITES, as well as a CMS Memorandum of Understanding for the Conservation of Cetaceans and their Habitats in the Pacific Islands Region. We hope that both steps signify the new (2006) Government’s strong commitment to cetacean conservation as well as sustainable and well-regulated wildlife trade.

We were therefore concerned to learn from recent press reports that up to 20 more dolphins (species unknown) have been live-captured in the Solomon Islands and may be exported. We are not aware that any credible, peer-reviewed studies of bottlenose dolphins have been undertaken in the Solomon Islands since 2003. Accordingly, we have not changed the conclusion we reached in 2003 that a non-detriment finding under CITES is not possible for these populations, and that exports should not take place. We are well aware of the Rapid Ecological Assessment work carried out in the Solomons in 2004 under the leadership of Benjamin Kahn, a Cetacean Specialist Group member. As indicated in his report, the results of that work were by no means sufficient or appropriate to serve as the basis for something like a non-detriment finding.

We would, of course, welcome information about any other studies that may have been conducted since then and are willing to provide an assessment of them for the purpose of helping CITES, and indeed any country interested in importing these animals, determine the validity of any export permits that might be issued by the Solomon Islands.

Signed: Randall Reeves (IUCN Cetacean Specialist Group, Chair)  
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