

**AN INVENTORY OF NATIONAL CAPABILITIES FOR CONSERVATION AND
RESEARCH ON SMALL CETACEANS IN VENEZUELA: RECENT AND CURRENT
RESEARCH PROJECTS**

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INTRODUCTION.

Increased awareness on cetacean conservation in Venezuela has helped to increase dedicated research effort on the part of government agencies, non-governmental organizations and universities. As a result, the non-governmental organization Sea Vida, the Ministry of Environment and Renewable Resources (MARN), Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MRE), with the support of the Caribbean Environment Programme (CEP) of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) have recently agreed to design and start to implement the “*Action Plan for conservation of marine mammals of Venezuela*” (VZ-MMAP), based on the guidelines of the “*Draft Marine Mammal Action Plan for the Wider Caribbean Region*” (MMAP). As agreed among participants, the VZ-MMAP will be presented at the next IV Conference of the Parties to the SPAW Protocol (of the Cartagena Convention), to be held in Montego Bay, Jamaica, next late November 2006. As such, this would be the first national action plan to be adopted and implemented in the Wider Caribbean Region (WCR) in response to the SPAW Protocol.

During the process of proposing such an action plan, several factors were taken into account, including a preliminary inventory of national capabilities, legal framework, as well as previous experience of local researchers and institutions. First, the “*National Strategy on Biological Diversity and its Action Plan*” was published by the Ministry of Environment and Renewable Resources in 2001 (MARN 2001) on the basis of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and provides a very strong foundation for this task. At a regional level, the WCR-MMAP is being designed with participation of a Group of International Experts coordinated by the CEP-UNEP and also provides a foundation and guidelines on the basis of the provisions of the SPAW Protocol. Finally, we in Venezuela count on a valuable group of researchers who during the last decade have contributed to generate baseline information upon which some priorities can be drawn as an input for the design of the VZ-MMAP.

In this working paper, I summarize most of the research efforts that different researchers have accomplished during the last decade, as one of the most critical requirements for the design and implementation of a successful VZ-MMAP, with emphasis on small cetaceans research in coastal areas. Description of projects or activities is based upon responses to a questionnaire sent to researchers. Current and on-going projects, as well as contact information of researchers, are also included as a reference. This information is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of research and conservation efforts on small cetaceans in Venezuelan EEZ waters, 1999-2006.

Description of Activity/Project/capability	Area of coverage	Contact person/responsible	Source/reference
Craniometrics of the genus <i>Sotalia</i> in the Lake of Maracaibo system.. Undergraduate Thesis, presented in 2005.	Lake of Maracaibo and Gulf of Venezuela	Biol. Tatiana León La Universidad del Zulia (LUZ) tatianaleonf@yahoo.com	León pers. comm. 2006
Ecological aspects of the genus <i>Sotalia</i> , Undergraduate Thesis, presented in 2005.	Lake of Maracaibo and Gulf of Venezuela	Biol. Tatiana León La Universidad del Zulia (LUZ) tatianaleonf@yahoo.com	León pers. comm. 2006
Habitat use of long-snouted common dolphin in north-eastern Venezuela studied aboard ferry-boats. Undergraduate Thesis, presented in 2006.	States of Nueva Esparta and Anzoátegui	T.S.U. Mario Orlando, Centro de Investigación de Cetáceos (CIC), cicvenezuela@yahoo.com	Bermúdez-Villapol pers. comm. 2006
Environmental education and training of human resources related to promotion of dolphin-watching. Ongoing project started in late 2004.	Coast of the Aragua State	Auristela Villarroel-Marín (Sea Vida), sea_vida@yahoo.es	Sea Vida
Abundance and distribution of small cetaceans. Undergraduate Thesis, started in March 2006	Coast of the Aragua State	María Gabriela Silva, Universidad Central de Venezuela (UCV)-Sea Vida, flaffy20@gmail.com	Sea Vida
Effect of boats on the behavior of dolphins. Undergraduate Thesis started in March 2006.	Coast of the Aragua State	Olga Lucía Herrera, UCV-Sea Vida, olgah82@gmail.com	Sea Vida
Biological and ecological aspects of bottlenose and Atlantic spotted dolphins, M. Sc. Thesis started in 2005.	Coast of the Aragua State	Biol. Sergio Cobarrubia, Universidad Simón Bolívar (USB) sergio.cobarrubia@gmail.com	Cobarrubia, pers. comm. 2006
Preliminary observations on ecological aspects of long-snouted common dolphin aboard commercial trips for dolphin-watching, 2004-2005	Mochima National Park, north-eastern Venezuela	Jaime Bolaños-Jiménez, Sea Vida megapterax@yahoo.com	Sea Vida
Abundance and distribution of tucuxi and other delphinids	Gulf of Venezuela	M.Sc. José Rojas, Instituto para la Conservación y Control de la Cuenca del Lago de Maracaibo www.iclam.gov.ve	ICLAM-MARN
Estimation of interactions between marine mammals, sea turtles and fisheries	Gulf of Venezuela and Lake of Maracaibo	M.Sc. Daría Pirela, (ICLAM-MARN) www.iclam.gov.ve	ICLAM-MARN
Ecological aspects of cetaceans, mainly long-snouted common dolphins	Península de Araya and Mochima National Park	M.Sc. Clemente Balladares, Oficina Nacional de Diversidad Biológica (ONDB-MARN) www.marn.gov.ve	ONDB-MARN
Ecological aspects of bottlenose dolphin, 1999-2000	Archipelago of Los Frailes and north-eastern waters of Margarita Island	Lenín Oviedo and Noemi Silva, Biotropica leninovil@hotmail.com mimoi07@hotmail.com	Oviedo et al. (2005)
A database on cetacean strandings, on-going project	Venezuelan Caribbean Sea	M.Sc. Clemente Balladares (ONDB-MARN) www.marn.gov.ve	ONDB-MARN
Ecological foundation for management of tucuxi in the Gulf of	Gulf of Venezuela	Sonsirée Ramirez-Carroz, La Universidad del Zulia (LUZ)-	Ramírez-Carroz, pers. comm. 2006

Venezuela. M. Sc. Thesis, August 2002-August 2003		Sociedad Conservacionista Aqua sonsireech@yahoo.com	
Distribution, abundance and surface behaviour of long-snouted common dolphin, 2004-2005	North-eastern Venezuela aboard ferry-boats from Puerto la Cruz to Margarita Island	Alimar Molero (LUZ-CIC) cicvenezuela@yahoo.com	Bermúdez-Villapol pers. comm. 2006
Design of the Action Plan for conservation of Marine Mammals, agreed in May 2006	Venezuela	Biol. Jaime Bolaños-Jiménez, (Sea Vida), with support of and participation of the MARN, MRE and CEP-UNEP megapterax@yahoo.com	Sea Vida
Population genetics of tucuxi, to be started in 2006	Venezuela	Leonardo Sánchez, LUZ-CIC cic_occidente@yahoo.es	Sánchez pers. comm.. 2006
Proposals for regulation of whalewatching and captivity, 2004-2006, presented to authorities of the MARN	Venezuela	Jaime Bolaños-Jiménez, Sea Vida megapterax@yahoo.com	Sea Vida
Some aspects of the natural history of long-snouted common dolphin, aboard commercial trips for dolphinwatching, January-June 2005	Mochima National Park, north-eastern Venezuela	Jaime Bolaños-Jimenez and A. Villarroel-Marin megapterax@yahoo.com	Sea Vida
Preliminary study on marketing issues related to dolphinwatching (a questionnaire on customer profile, advertising, quality of service, perception of impact on dolphin groups), January-June 2006	Mochima National Park, north-eastern Venezuela	Jaime Bolaños-Jimenez and A. Villarroel-Marin megapterax@yahoo.com	Sea Vida
Ecological foundation for conservation of the tucuxi in the Gulf of Venezuela. M. Sc. Thesis, presented in 2005	Gulf of Venezuela	Sonsiree Ramirez-Carroz sonsireech@yahoo.com	Ramirez-Carroz pers. comm. 2006
Stranding response and contingencies, permanent project	Margarita, Coche and Cubagua Islands	Dirección Estatal Ambiental Nueva Esparta-MARN www.marn.gov.ve Centro de Investigación de Cetáceos (CIC)	DEA-NE-MARN CIC
Marine mammal sampling collection for reference purposes	Venezuela	Dr. Javier Sanchez and Biol. Francisco Bisbal, curators, Museo de la Estacion Biologica de Rancho Grande (EBRG-MARN) www.marn.gov.ve	EBRG-MARN
Inclusion of marine mammals in the terms of reference of baseline studies, impact assessment and monitoring of development projects in coastal and offshore areas, Presidential Decree 1257, 1996	Venezuela	www.marn.gov.ve	MARN

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CEP-UNEP. 2005. Draft Action Plan for the Conservation of Marine Mammals in the Wider Caribbean Region. Working paper presented at the Regional Workshop of Experts on the Development of the Marine Mammal Action Plan for the Wider Caribbean Region, Barbados, 18-21 July, 2005. Available at: <http://www.cep.unep.org/pubs/meetingreports/MMAP/mmap.php>

Oviedo, L. and Silva, N. 2005. Sighting frequency and relative abundance of bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*) along the northeast coast of Margarita Island and Los Frailes Archipelago, Venezuela. Rev. Biol. Tropical, 53(3-4):595-600