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Report on Cetacean Research in Brazil

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GEMARS (Grupo de Estudos de Mamíferos Aquáticos do Rio Grande do Sul) is a non-profit and non-governmental organization, founded in 1991 in Porto Alegre, Brazil, that aids the development of research and educational programs concerning the biology and conservation of marine mammal species in southern Brazil. Since 1992 GEMARS has worked in collaboration with the CECLIMAR/UFRGS (a research institute of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul) in order to carry out projects concerning especially the mortality of marine mammals in gillnet fisheries along this area.

Knowledge of small cetacean species along the Brazilian waters has increased significantly in recent years. Despite such an increase, much is still to be learned about their biology and threats to their conservation in this region. The largest concern is the mortality of these species caused by entanglements in gillnets along the coastal and continental waters of Brazil. This is certainly the main conservation problem of these species in Brazilian waters, and although there is national legislation concerning the protection of marine mammals - Governmental Edict No. 011 SUDEPE (21 Feb. 1986) and No. 7.634 (18 Dec. 1987) - the official agencies do not have any policy to control the fishery activities and evaluate their effects on these species.

In the Southwestern Atlantic Ocean, the franciscana (*Pontoporia blainvillei*) appears to be the most severely affected species by coastal gillnet fishing. Nevertheless, in most circumstances, the existing information is insufficient to evaluate the effects of gillnets on the population of these species. Furthermore, since there are no accurate population estimates for any small cetacean species in Brazilian waters, the negative impact of these activities may be potentially serious. This seems to be especially true for the franciscana (*P. blainvillei*), an endemic small cetacean of the South Western Atlantic Ocean. This species is included in the List of Brazilian Fauna Threatened and under appendix II of the International Trade in Endangered Species Fauna and Flora (CITES) of which Brazil is a signatory.

In order to get better documentation and understanding of the incidental catches of small cetaceans, especially the franciscana, in the southern Brazilian waters, we began in 1992 a research program on the two main fisheries communities along the northern Rio Grande do Sul state. For this purpose, we have been monitoring these fishing villages on a regular basis in order to conduct observations aboard coastal fishing vessels and interviews with fishermen and local inhabitants. Our survey also aims to result in a higher level of public awareness, since it will make local inhabitants and fishermen aware of the importance of their cooperation to the success of our research and ultimately to the conservation of the marine mammal population and the coastal ecosystem. Ongoing education in an informal way has been implemented together with the local fishermen. By discussing with the fishermen we expect to be able to assess their concerns and opinions about the significance (economic and cultural) of marine mammal interactions, which should be most beneficial in determining the best approach to increase their awareness about the gill netting problem.

The data obtained during the course of this project in combination with technological developments,

implementation of educational programs, management enforcement actions that take into account realistically the cultural, economic and social aspects of the region, can provide viable solutions for the small cetaceans-fishery interactions problem.

Nevertheless, to fully attain these goals it is certainly necessary for there to be a greater interest and involvement of the Brazilian government and private organizations in this question. These attitudes could be essential to provide not only the support for long-term research, but also to provide, for example, compensation and economic incentives to fishermen in response to their cooperation.

The conservation of the small cetacean species along the Brazilian coast is certainly a complex and delicate question, since it involves a number of different social, cultural and economic aspects. Nevertheless, these problems need to be faced by all the segments of the society if we want in fact to guarantee the conservation of these species in Brazilian waters.

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