

Project Update: May 2008

Recent poll suggests 97 percent of Chileans support whale sanctuary

Environmental groups are applauding this week's promise by President Michelle Bachelet to convert Chile's entire coastline – one of the longest in the world – into a whale sanctuary.

"We're very content with the president's announcement because this will create a government policy that favours whale conservation," Bárbara Galletti, president of the Center for Cetacean Conservation (CCC), told the Patagonia Times. "It's something that's lacking right now. We need a legal framework that supports our long-term work with these animals."

"This is a huge step forward in terms of marine conservation," she added. "For the first time the country, which has focused exclusively on extracting (marine resources), is putting forth a vision that involves taking advantage of its resources through conservation strategies, such as eco-tourism."

The CCC is an environmental NGO committed to protecting the numerous species of whales and dolphins that occupy Chilean waters.

Bachelet made the announcement Wednesday as part of her annual May 21 State of the Nation speech. During next month's annual meeting of the International Whaling Commission (IWC), she promised, "Chile will condemn the capture and killing of whales for scientific purposes." The IWC gathering, to be held in Santiago, will take place throughout the month of June.

"Furthermore, we will send Congress a bill declaring Chile off limits for whale hunting," said Bachelet.

The whale sanctuary plan was first proposed last year by the National Confederation of Chilean Artisan Fishermen (CONAPACH), which partnered with the CCC and Ecoceanos, a Santiago-based environmental NGO, in lobbying Chilean government authorities. A law already in place outlaws whaling through 2025. CONAPACH's Whale Sanctuary for Chile proposal would extend that law indefinitely.

In recent months the initiative has received almost universal backing, with the Chamber of Deputies, the Senate and even the Navy throwing their weight behind it. Some 120 environmental groups around the planet also support the proposed sanctuary. A recent Adimark poll, furthermore, suggests that an overwhelming 97 percent of Chileans back the idea.

"This is a huge triumph for the people of Chile and a strong international signal by the host country of the International Whaling Commission gathering," said Ecoceanos Director Juan Carlos Cárdenas. "This demonstrates the effectiveness of the combined effort by environmentalist and artisan fishers, who in demanding the creation of a sanctuary were able to attract the support of 97 percent of the Chilean public."

According to Cárdenas, nearly 50 percent of the world's whale species pass through Chilean waters on a regular basis. Every year, furthermore, Chile hosts a sizeable population of blue whales, which come to feed and reproduce off the northern coast of Chiloé. Nearly hunted to

extinction during the last century, blue whales – the world's largest creatures – are still very much endangered.

By Benjamin Witte (benwitte@santiagotimes.cl this e-mail address is being protected from spam bots, you need JavaScript enabled to view it)

Written by Benjamin Witte
Thursday, 22 May 2008