IndoCet | Indian Ocean Network for Cetacean Research

INDOCET MEETING

Promoting collaboration among researchers

in the south-western Indian Ocean and develop a regional strategy for cetacean conservation

Special Session of the WIOMSA Symposium

Mombasa– Kenya

October 3rd, 2025

WIOMSA Coasts Ocean and People — 13TH SCIENTIFIC SYMPOSIUM

AFD

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1. Context and objectives of the meeting

The IndoCet Network, established in 2014, brings together researchers and organizations from across the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) to advance scientific understanding and the conservation of cetaceans. The primary goals of the network are to improve the collection of scientific data on WIO cetaceans, to promote their conservation, to foster collaboration and communication between research groups and to develop capacity for cetacean research and conservation in the region. The 13th WIOMSA Symposium in Mombasa, Kenya, offered an opportunity for an in-person meeting of the network, and to engage other people from the region.

The IndoCet meeting was held on Friday 3 October 2025, as part of a "Special Session" of the WIOMSA Symposium. The Special Session was open to all IndoCet members and any cetacean researchers from the SWIO or individuals involved in marine mammal conservation that might be interested in joining the network. The meeting took the form of a full day workshop which offered opportunities to reinforce links among regional cetacean researchers, discuss progress on IndoCet activities, identify priority actions and inspire new collaborative initiatives.

The general goal of the meeting was to increase opportunities for regional collaborations on cetaceans, as well as provide some dedicated time to discuss needs for advancing ongoing initiatives. As with other migratory megafauna, cetaceans range widely and frequently cross borders, and their effective conservation needs effective collaboration. The specific objectives of the session were to:

- Provide an opportunity for regional researchers to share news of their projects and their ambitions for further work and collaboration.
- Set priorities and identify collaborative actions that could be implemented in the future, together with identified or potential funding opportunities;
- Work on the advancement of a regional, collaborative humpback whale study that will feed into the workplan of the International Whaling Commission (IWC) 'Southern Ocean Research Partnership' (SORP) that seeks to improve the assessment and management of whale stocks.
- Share ideas on how to improve communication (within and outside the network), networking and reinforce links with regional and international institutions.

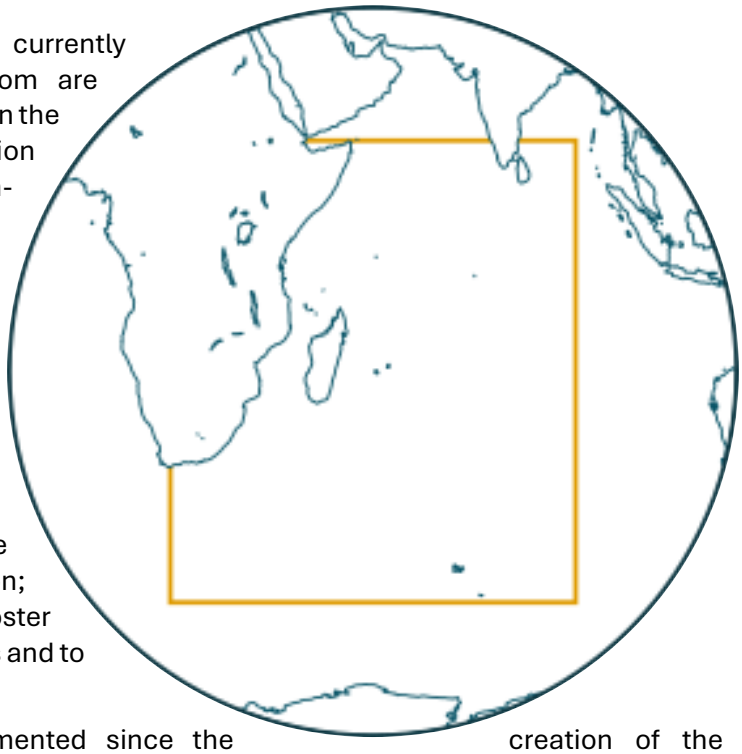
The agenda of the meeting is provided in Annex 1. This report summarizes the presentations and discussions that took place during the Special Session.

Both online and in-person participants contributed to the session. The workshop participants represented organizations involved in cetacean research and conservation in the following countries: Madagascar, Mauritius, Mozambique, Kenya, Tanzania, Reunion, Mayotte, South Africa. The list of participants is provided in Annex 2.

The venue was funded by Agence Française de Developpement (AFD), via the CET'IZENS project, led by GLOBICE.

2. Opening remarks & introductions

Following the welcome to the participants and a roundtable of introductions, general information about IndoCet was provided by Violaine Dulau (Globice), together with an update on recent network activities.



Initiated in 2014, the network currently comprises 60 members, all of whom are actively involved in cetacean research in the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) region (Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, South-Africa, Madagascar, Reunion/Mayotte, Mauritius) as well as 10 associate members. The Consortium is dedicated to all cetacean species across the WIO, including countries within the Nairobi Convention and Indian Ocean Commission range, and the sub-Antarctic region of the Indian Ocean. Its primary goals are to improve knowledge on and promote conservation of cetaceans in the region; to facilitate communication and foster collaboration between research groups and to develop capacity in the region.

Several activities have been implemented since the creation of the network, including the creation of an interactive website and a regular newsletter that reports on in-progress research programs and recent publications, establishes communication within the group and serves as a public forum. Extensive effort has been put into the development of regional collaboration to facilitate data sharing and matching humpback whale photo-identification data. The network has also been actively involved in collating existing data on cetacean stranding events and in coordinating stranding responses.

3. Vision of the network: develop a regional framework for cetacean conservation

3.1. Threats Mini-Symposium Feedback – Tim Collins (WCS)

Tim Collins provided a brief summary on the marine megafauna threats mini symposium, held on Tuesday 30th of September. Despite its title, the mini symposium focused exclusively on marine mammals and originally included five talks on regional cetaceans and a sixth on the dugong in Madagascar. However, due to unforseen circumstances, two talks had to be cancelled, and the final session focused on four cetacean talks. However, the talk on dugongs (by Norbert Andrianarivelo) was given a speaker slot during the main symposium and is included here as well:

- Violaine Dulau – Satellite telemetry reveals potential interactions and vessel collision risks for migrating humpback whales.
- Tahina Rasoloarijao – Abundance of Omura's whales off northwest Madagascar using photographic mark-recapture.

- Gill Braulik – Cross-border population of Indian Ocean humpback dolphins in Tanzania and Kenya.
- Shanan Atkins – Identifying conservation priorities for the Indian Ocean Humpback Dolphin Conservation Network (HuDoNet).
- Norbert Andrianarivelo – Sightings, incidental bycatches and hunting of dugongs on the west coast of Madagascar.

The intent of the mini symposium was to highlight some of the major threats and environmental concerns that marine mammals are exposed to in the Western Indian Ocean. Major concerns identified during the session included bycatches in both artisanal (typically coastal) and industrial fisheries (including IUU fisheries), hunting, and the stressors associated with increasing vessel traffic, particularly vessel strikes which likely affect a much broader range of marine species as well. Discussion among participants highlighted the fact that these concerns for WIO marine mammal species, as well as several others (e.g. underwater noise, chemical and plastic pollution) are well established. These concerns have been raised many times in different fora, including at the Nairobi Convention, but appropriate mitigation actions are still lacking.

It was proposed that **developing a regional marine mammal status report and associated action plan** could be useful for managers and policy makers. This could be similar to the regional status assessment produced for sharks and rays and could benefit from some of the work completed for that report (including the review of legal mechanisms and international conventions). Ideally such a report would be endorsed by relevant regional bodies such as WIOMSA, the Nairobi Convention and the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), as well as garner the attention of international IGOs, including the Internation Whaling Commission (IWC) and Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC).

4. Networking and collaborative initiatives

4.1. IndoCet website – Violaine Dulau (Globice)

Funding from AFD (Agence Française de Développement) has been secured by GLOBICE to refurbish the IndoCet website as part of the CET'IZEN project. Participants were invited to keep this in mind during discussions throughout the day and to contribute their ideas for reorganising the website. A form was also sent to IndoCet members to provide feedback on the website and on the communication tools in general, the results of which are also incorporated here.

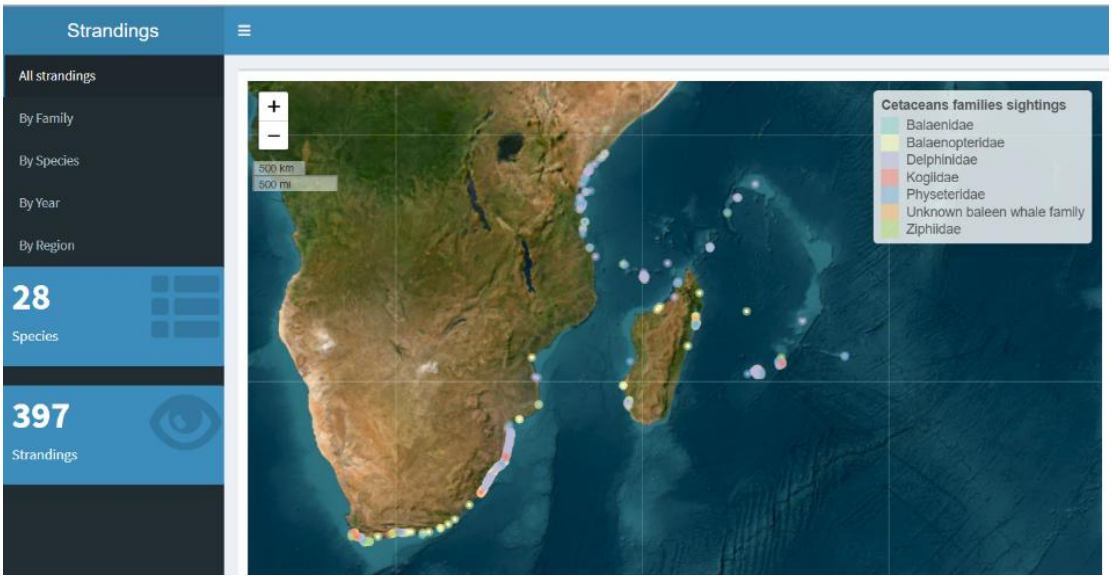
The IndoCet website was initially thought of as a tool to collate metadata from the region, providing an overview of the existing sources of data on cetaceans in the WIO. It was built as an interactive website that allows IndoCet members to have their own user account through which they can share and access information. Members can update the following pages:

- Publication page: this section aims to centralise cetacean publications from the region. To date, 150 publications have been uploaded (77 in 2022). This is a useful source of information and members are encourage to keep updating the page with their new publications.

- Metadata page: this section gives information on existing data, data type (satellite tracking; photo-ID; biopsy; acoustics etc.). The relevance of this page was questioned as it is not updated by the members, probably due to the format and type of information requested. It was proposed to simplify the type of information provided. To facilitate

updates, a form could be sent annually to members that would inform an update of the website, and in turn this would inform the annual update of IndoCet activities provided to the IWC SC.

- Report a stranding: this page provides a way to report and centralize information on stranding events. The public can see part of the table and IndoCet members can see all of it (when logged in). Regional strandings prior to 2020 were compiled in a regional publication led by Stephanie Plön. Therefore, IndoCet members are invited to report strandings data after 2020 in the online table. An interactive map is produced on the website, but needs to be updated (no automatic update of the map from the table).



See below for further Discussion related to strandings.

- Entanglement page: It was suggested that a separate table be created on the "Entanglement" page to report entanglement events.

- Organisation page, under the "resources" menu: provide information on the organizations currently working on cetaceans in the SWIO (contact, logo, etc.). It was proposed to make that page interactive so that members can update the information on their organization, and perhaps the projects they are currently focused on.

4.1.1. New ideas/needs identified for a website update:

Feedback from workshop participants included the general comment that it is built more like a tool for researchers, but does not provide information on cetaceans for a more general audience. This should be improved in the new version and could be linked to the development of pages on a series of major themes. Some of this information could also be linked in a logical way to the proposed regional status assessment, providing a means for readers of the assessment to learn more, and review the most recent information.

Candidate **technical needs and features for the renovated website**:

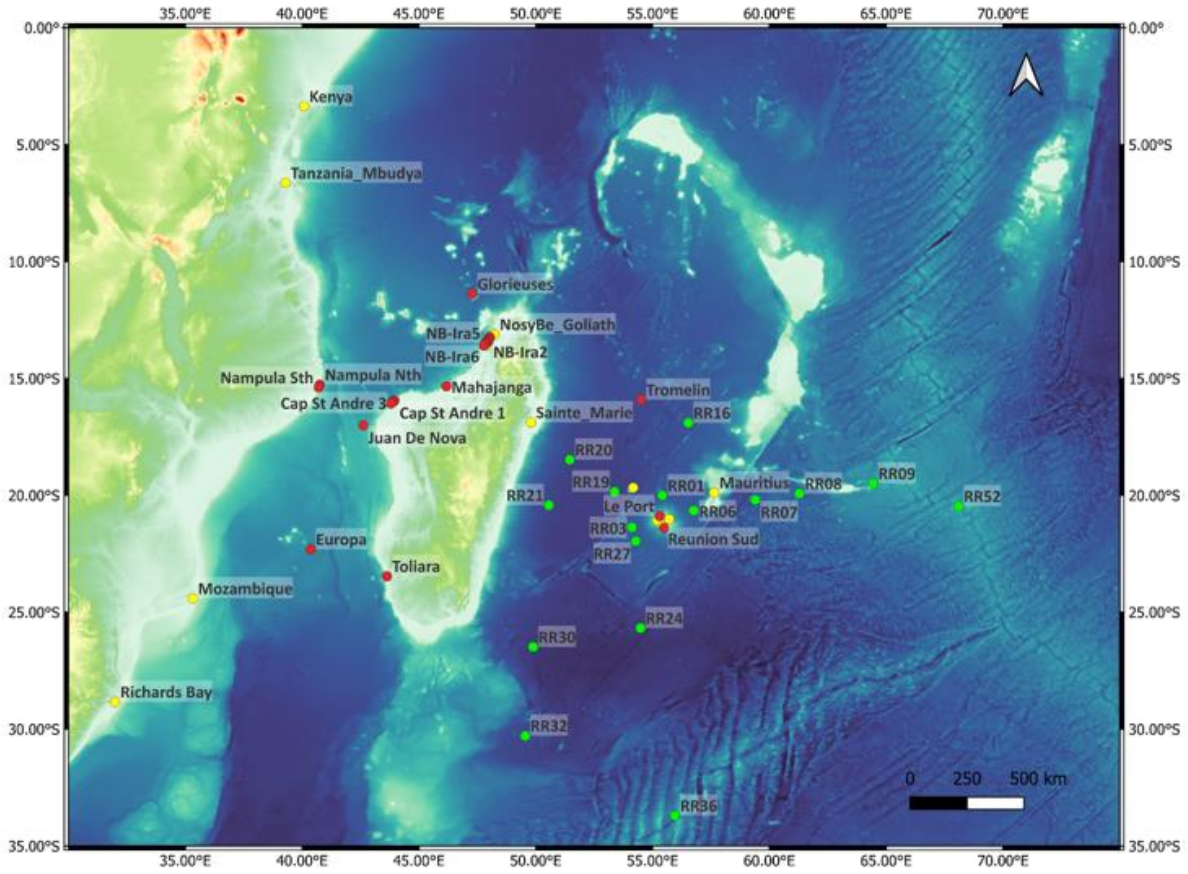
- Online forms sent to the members (request for annual updates), that populate tables on the website (metadata and organisational information for example).
- Maps of contributed data, particularly strandings and acoustic recorders (see below), that automatically update when the associated table on the website is updated.

- Links to other organisations and networks (eg: WIOMSA, HuDoNet, ASWN) and regional project websites.
- Improve the version of the site that is accessed on smartphones (currently not operational).

The idea of developing a regional "**species identification sheet**" was proposed under the collective banners of regional networks (IndoCet, HuDoNet, ASWN), rather than each country or partner developing their own. Uko Gorter, a marine mammal illustrator who has produced many identification sheets for other organisations has agreed to help, but a funding source needs to be identified. The sheet would exist on the website (and regional websites as needed) as a printable pdf, but if sufficient funding can be identified then printed copies on waterproof paper would also be produced for distribution.

4.2. Passive Acoustic Monitoring – Emmanuelle Leroy (Globice)

Emmanuelle Leroy presented a map showing the locations of hydrophone deployments in the SWIO. The aim was to provide an overview of the existing acoustic data in the WIO and the locations of any instruments that are still recording. This led to the idea of **creating an interactive map on the IndoCet website**, displaying the locations of both past and present recording devices, their associated metadata (e.g. data holders, recorder type, site depth, sampling frequency, etc.), the types of information that has already been extracted from devices (e.g. whale song detections, noise levels, etc.), the existing and upcoming publications based on these data, and the contact person for raw data access requests.

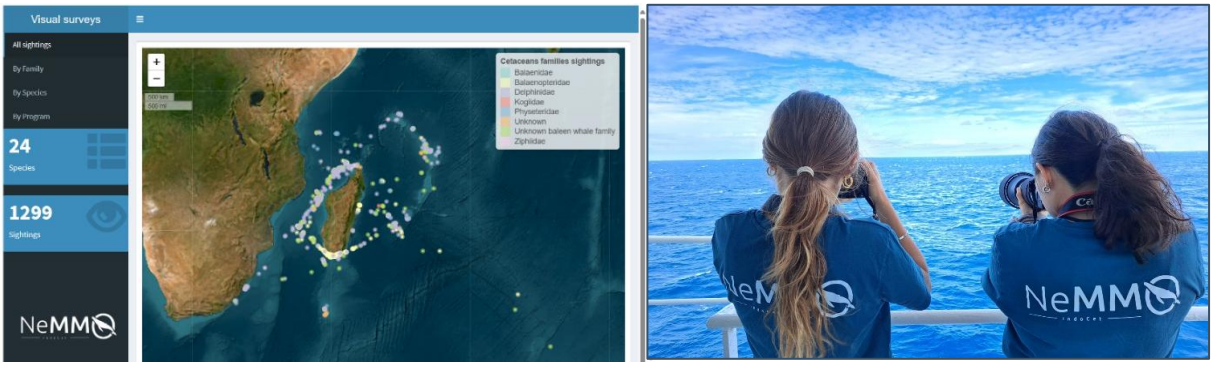


Location of the hydrophones deployed (past and current) in the SWIO. Red dots: deep water hydrophones; yellow dots : shallow water hydrophones ; green dots : OBS/H.

4.3. Network of Marine Mammal Observers – Violaine Dulau & Gwen Penry

IndoCet has developed the "Network of Marine Mammal Observers" (NeMMO) with the aim of expanding data collection on cetaceans in offshore waters from "vessels of opportunity", including cruise ships and fisheries patrol boats. Contributing observers are drawn from IndoCet and, receive training and apply standardised protocols. In the long-term, this dataset will be valuable for assessing species distribution and overlaps with human activities. The initiative also aims to increase capacity and build up a pool of MMO in the region.

So far, partnership has been developed mostly with French fleet by GLOBICE (15 surveys on the patrol vessel Osiris II and 5 surveys on the research vessel Marion Dufesne out of 20 surveys). Tim Collins and Gwen Penry have also established partnerships with the private sector. Two surveys were conducted with a cruise company Noble Caledonia, led by Gwen Penry. The data are collated into a database curate by Globice. The database currently include over 1300 sightings across 25 species which is shared on the IndoCet website as an active map (NeMMO, need to be updated). Other marine megafauna and marine litter data are also collected as part of the protocol.



IndoCet members are encouraged to develop partnerships with other platforms of opportunities to expand the spatial coverage and data collection. Call for participation as MMO for these surveys will be sent via the IndoCet mailing list. However, funding may be required to cover travel expenses, depending on the ports of embarkation and disembarkation.

4.4. Regional strandings – Stephanie Plön (online) – (UCT, BioConsult)

Since the publication of the IndoCet stranding paper in JCRM in 2023, 53 strandings of 28 species have been reported on the IndoCet website. These data are reported on an interactive map on the website (387 sightings, 28 species). Publication of the article raised the interest of the International Whaling Commission (IWC) and subsequently a concept note for five workshops in the SWIO region in collaboration with various IndoCet members and IWC Strandings Expert Panel (SEP) members, to the WIOMSA call in February 2024 "Sustainable Blue Future in the Western Indian Ocean – Institutional Strengthening through Science, Capacity, and Assimilation for a Sustainable Blue Future – SCALABLE" (2023-2026); unfortunately, it was not successful.

An article entitled "Capacity building to tackle the growing problem of stranded whales and dolphins in the Western Indian Ocean" was published in the marine mammal special issue of the WIOMSA magazine. The article highlighted the need for a more regional and ecologically relevant approach to strandings response, which is also likely to attract greater funding support. Members of the IWC SEP have also supported regional strandings workshops for government veterinarians and wildlife rangers, as well as formal necropsy training with government veterinarians in Sri Lanka

and India. IWC SEP subgroups have been formed to drive various themes forward, including capacity building, co-chaired by Stephanie. It is hoped that this will help push regional capacity-building to the top of the agenda.

A brief discussion regarding the stranding pages of the IndoCet website showed that more resources need to be placed on the website, a step for **verification of strandings logged on the website** needs to be included, and the latter could possibly be achieved through the implementation of country coordinators (with contact of the national representative-contact person on the website). This could include a **spreadsheet or table that lists appropriate people who can or do coordinate strandings responses in each country**. More thought is needed to see how to best organize the stranding information ("report stranding", "stranding network" etc.).

4.5. Whale disentanglement – Mike Meyer (online) – (SAWDN)

Mike Meÿer (IWC African Trainer) provided an online presentation on large whale entanglement response training and the Global Whale Entanglement Response Network, in collaboration with the International Whaling Commission. Previously, participating countries were responsible for some IWC Whale Disentanglement Training expenses, which included classroom theory sessions and practical activities involving two vessels (the "whale" and the "rescue vessel") as well as equipment such as kegging buoys, working line buoys, gloves, helmets, safety knives, and a disentanglement pole. IWC might be able to fund training for four *IndoCet* countries: *Madagascar, Mauritius, Seychelles, and Comores*. The IWC Trainer, will coordinate with third parties to assist with organizing the disentanglement training. These country representatives must involve their governments in meetings and are required to submit quotes and invoices to the IWC.

5. Communication

5.1. Within the network

Several communication tools have been developed, in addition to the website, to facilitate sharing information among researchers from the region:

- Newsletter: Initiated in 2020, we have managed to issue two newsletters per year, thanks to the contributions of IndoCet members. Newsletters are available to download on the IndoCet website and the articles also inform the News section of the website. The objective is to foster communication between members by sharing information about current and future projects being developed in the region. **Thanks for contributing!**
- Whatsapp group: to share instant news, request advice or expertise from the network.
- Facebook page: the page is currently not very active and there is a need for a FB community manager. Shedic Marchessau volunteered to develop communication of the network on social media.
- A mailing list (indocet@framalistes.org): Members can use this e-mail address to communicate and send info to all IndoCet members.
- "IndoCet happy hour": More recently, informal webinars were organized to provide an opportunity to share info about project, recent results, publication and initiatives.

Globally, the participants found that the Newsletter was very useful and a good way of communicating about ongoing projects and sharing updates. Although there have been only two Happy Hour webinars so far, the participants found it was a good way of sharing information and updates and should therefore continue.

5.2. Outside the network

Efforts have also been made to communicate about the existence of the network and IndoCet activities outside the network, and to liaise with international institutions:

- Since 2023, annual reports providing updated on the IndoCet activity is being presented at the Scientifc Committee of the IWC. This takes form of a work paper, presented orally by Tim Collins and Salvatore Cerchio during the Scientific Committee meeting.
- Diffusion of the 2023 IndoCet meeting reported to a large audience, including WIOMSA and IOC.
- An article was produced for special issue on marine mammals of the WIOMSA magazine to increase the visibility of the network at the regional level.

Discussions about how to increase visibility of the network and link with regional institutions. It was proposed to **create a mailing list of including institutional contacts** to give a broader audience to the IndoCet newsletter and associated reports, etc.

6. Developing collaboration with other networks

Presentations were given by representatives of other relevant networks in order to inform members of other initiatives and to foster networking, collaboration, and inspiration.

6.1. Indian Ocean humpback dolphin network– Shanan Atkins (HudoNet)

Shanan Atkins presented a brief overview of the Indian Ocean Humpback Dolphin Conservation Network (HuDoNET), a network that lies within the larger and more established IndoCet and ASWN networks. The Indian Ocean humpback dolphin (*Sousa plumbea*) is Endangered, and their distribution is restricted to very shallow, coastal waters in the WIO. Their threats include bycatch in gillnets, coastal development and associated activities, as well as chemical contaminants, noise and more. Scientists and conservationists formed HuDoNET to galvanise conservation action across the species range, as well as to connect, share and inspire. A brand-new *Network Action Plan* is hot off the press, and will guide HuDoNET's activities over the next few years. **We welcome those who would like to join us! HuDoNET.org**

6.2. Important Marine Mammal Areas – Gill Braulik (St Andrews University)

Gill Braulik, Deputy Chair of the IUCN Marine Mammal Protected Areas Task Force gave a summary of progress on identifying Important Marine Mammal Areas (IMMAs) accross the globe. She explained that now 80% of the global oceans have been considered for the identification of IMMAs (and candidate IMMAs) and 323 important areas have been identified. She recapped the 8 different criteria that are used to identify important habitats and explained the science based expert driven process. She then focussed on the IMMAs in the Western Indian Ocean and explained what has been happening since the 2019 WIO workshop, including the update to the critical habitat screening layer, distribution of the shapefiles via the Proteus Partnership and IPEICA to the oil and gas development sector, engagement with multiple sectors of the shipping industry including insurance, risk management and routing consultants, and the use of IMMAs for marine spatial planning. Gill finished her presentation by distributing copies of the new IMMA comic, and asking for Indocet to propose stories of success where IMMAs have resulted in concrete benefits to the environment.

She also informed the participants that **IMMA success stories are needed from the region for the decadal review**. A call for contribution could be sent the IndoCet members.

6.3. IORA Whale Watching Network – Audrey Cartraud (CEDTM)

Audrey Cartraud introduced the network on sustainable whale and dolphin watching tourism of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). Since 2017, CEDTM leads the development of responsible whale watching practices on Reunion Island and has three main objectives:

1) Awareness and education,
2) Improvement of knowledge through science
3) The federation of whale watching stakeholders

Since 2023, the CEDTM is in charge of coordinating the regional IORA's network on sustainable whale and dolphin watching tourism, developed in 2017 in collaboration with the Australian government, the Sri Lankan government end the IWC. The objective of the network is to enhance regional cooperation in sustainable whale and dolphin watching tourism in the Indian Ocean through a collaborative approach, including private sector, local communities, governments, NGOs, scientists and other stakeholders. Memberships are open to all IORA Member States on a voluntary basis through focal points and has recently extended to other countries. The coordination of the network takes turns between members on a voluntary basis.

In partnership with the IWC, extensive work has been done at the start of the network to encourage IORA countries to develop profiles for IWC whale watching Handbook, to develop whale watching guidelines or adopt international ones, and to engage across both IORA & IWC organizations.

The network is working through the sharing of information, capacity building, and the provision of expertise. This is done mostly through annual webinars and newsletters. A socio-economic note about whale watching activity in Reunion Island has been published as well as a legal note of whale watching in the Indian ocean.

This is done to promote responsible tourism practices related to whale and dolphin watching activities, and to address the need for improved regulatory frameworks to ensure the protection of cetaceans in the region. The ultimate goal is to ensure the economic, social, and environmental sustainability of this tourism sector. Handbooks and guidance are available – email Audrey

7. Scientific Updates

7.1. Sperm whale PhD study – Karthik Ashok (online) - (Curtin University)

Karthik Ashok presented progress on his PhD on sperm whale (*Physeter macrocephalus*) behavioural ecology in the southwestern Indian Ocean. His study aims to identify gaps in our understanding of regional population and behavioural dynamics of sperm whales through multiscale analysis using passive acoustic monitoring and biologging. Work focuses on the waters of the eastern Mozambique Channel and Mauritius. The research explores the baseline presence of sperm whale clicks and their associated click types across the western shelf edge of Madagascar using bottom-mounted passive acoustic recorders, to understand their spatiotemporal and seasonal occupancy in waters where biological acoustic signals such as snapping shrimp also pose a long-term monitoring challenge. At a mesoscale, population densities aim to identify important regions for conservation management. At a finer scale, this research models sperm whale behaviour around island ecosystems, particularly in Mauritius

where anthropogenic activity, such as whale watching and swimming-with-whales, may significantly influence their feeding and habitat use. Sample parameters extracted from DTag biologgers were presented for a 3D behavioural model. Such a multiscale approach provides a foundation for evidence-based conservation strategies and establishes baseline data for long-term monitoring programs in data-deficient areas.

7.2. Sperm whales of the Mascarenes – Lana Barteneva (MMCO)

Lana Barteneva summarised the first long-term population assessment of sperm whales in the Mascarene region, based on 17 years of photo-identification data (2008–2024). A joint catalogue of 280 individuals suggests the presence of approximately 220 whales, including about 30 residents near Mauritius. The study identified distinct ecological specialisations among social units and detected signs of increasing mortality. Findings have informed conservation management, including whale-watching regulation updates, Marine Spatial Planning inputs, and public outreach through MMCO programmes reaching over 95,000 students. The research highlights the global significance of this island-associated population and underscores the need for broader regional collaboration to better understand sperm whale populations and distribution across the Indian Ocean.

7.3. Fisheries interactions – Paul Tixier (online) - (MARBEC/IRD, France)

Paul Tixier, from the Institute for Research and Development (IRD) presented the 4-year project COEXISTENCE (2025-2028; PIs: P Tixier, Q Schull & J Mourier; ANR/NRF/AFD funding) that aims at understanding the socio-ecological mechanisms of fisheries - large marine predators conflicts in the Mozambique Channel to identify sustainable solutions. It involves 21 collaborators (several of which being part of the Indocet Consortium, including Globice) from 5 countries (France, South Africa, Mozambique, Madagascar, Comoros). It will focus on the main shark and odontocete species involved in direct and indirect interactions with fisheries such as bull/tiger/hammerhead sharks, killer whales, false killer whales and short-finned pilot whales, based on both existing and new data (data to be collected as part of dedicated trips at sea). It is structured into 4 Work Packages: Spatial Connectivity (assessing animal movements through biologging), Genetic Connectivity (population structure and gene flows through genetic analyses on tissue samples), Overlaps fisheries/predators (mapping and modelling the nature and severity of interactions), Human dimensions of the conflicts (analyzing costs-benefits of adjustments in fishing practices and social representations), and Solutions (developing mitigation solutions through an integrative approach). Activities on killer whale interactions with longline fisheries in southern Africa have already started through PhD and Masters projects.

Paul also provided an overview of the 3-year project INTOP led by IRD (2025-2027; PI: P Bach from MARBEC/IRD; European Union funding) that aims at understanding and assessing interactions between Reunion pelagic longline fisheries and odontocetes in the SW Indian Ocean. This project is conducted mainly on Reunion fisheries, and in partnership with GLOBICE. In complement to COEXISTENCE, it will i) identify the odontocete species involved in depredation through acoustics (Deployment of acoustic recorders on fishing lines in collaboration with Globice), develop a database of odontocete depredation in the SW Indian Ocean, implement protocols for detailed data collection on odontocete depredation, and model the distribution of depredating odontocetes.

7.4. Pygmy killer whales – Gwen Penry (MRI Whale Unit, University of Pretoria)

Gwen Penry presented information on recent live encounters of PKWs in South African, the first for over 50 years. The last reported live sighting of PKWs was in 1969 off the KwaZulu Natal coast

in water depths>1000 but between 2021 and 2025, eight opportunistic encounters with PKWs were made in Sodwana Bay, situated within the iSimangaliso Marine Protected Area (MPA) and World Heritage Site. All encounters occurred in unusually shallow (< 25 m) waters and often in association with Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphins, *Tursiops aduncus*. The sightings suggest that the iSimangaliso MPA is important for this poorly understood and rarely observed species. Dedicated research using passive acoustic monitoring is underway to identify the temporal occurrence of PKWs, and other small cetaceans in the MPA. This will provide baseline information for further research and long-term monitoring of cetaceans in national waters, as well as regional conservation initiatives, such as IndoCet, that depend on transboundary cooperation for effective conservation management.

During discussion it was noted that the reported sightings were relatively close geographically to a sighting reported by Allport et al. (2017) of pygmy killer whales in waters just ~15 NE of Inhaca Island in southern Maputo Bay, and could be linked. There are also plans to place a hydrophone just offshore of the Machangulo Peninsula and could be useful for tracking transboundary movements of this species. Reference recordings would also be necessary for ensuring detections are correctly attributed to the species.

7.5. Madagascar Project & HWWC– Schédir Marchesseau (Cetamada)

Schédir Marchesseau, Vice-President of Cétamada, presented an overview of the research activities that the association will undertake in the coming seasons. This included three ongoing PhD theses and three projects in collaboration with various organisations. These projects focus on the behaviour, genetics and health status of humpback whales in Madagascar; the study of marine litter on Sainte Marie Island (Sainte Marie); and the study of sea turtles in Madagascar.

The Indocet gathering was also an opportunity for Cetamada to present the World Congress on Humpback Whales, to be held a few weeks later in Tadoussac, Quebec (Canada). Since its inception, the aim of this conference has been to bring together scientists and institutions working on the same subject of study—humpback whales—in order to facilitate discussions at an event on a human scale. This year's congress, now in its fourth edition, was expecting hundreds of participants with six invited speakers, one honorary president, 37 talks, 11 posters and four workshops. But with the latest edition barely over, we are already looking ahead to the future of this conference for its fifth edition. A return of the conference to the Indian Ocean is currently being enthusiastically discussed.

7.6. Marine Mammal Research in Kenya – Mike Mwango'mbe (KMMREC)

Michael Mwango'mbe provided an update on work in Kenya. Since 2010, the Kenya Marine Mammal Research and Conservation Programme has played a critical role in advancing marine mammal research and conservation along the Kenyan coastline. Over this period, KMMREC has conducted 288 marine mammal surveys, during which both inshore and offshore species have been documented. These include 292 sightings of *Tursiops aduncus*, 39 *Sousa plumbea*, 4 *Stenella longirostris*, and 1 *Pseudorca crassidens*. These efforts have been made possible through strong collaborations with NGOs, government agencies, and local stakeholders along the Kenyan coastline. The program has also developed a photo-identification catalogue for inshore dolphins (bottlenose and humpback dolphins), with some dolphins being monitored for over eight years, providing critical insights into site fidelity, habitat use and exposure to threats.

The continuation of this work is essential for the long-term conservation of marine mammals in Kenya. The programme combines scientific research and community engagement to ensure that conservation strategies are both locally relevant, participatory and ecologically effective. As marine ecosystems face increasing pressure from human activities and climate change, sustained collaboration among stakeholders is key to mitigating threats and promoting resilience. Strengthening these partnerships and expanding research coverage will not only safeguard Kenya's marine biodiversity but also reinforce its position in regional marine conservation efforts.

7.7. Participatory monitoring in Mayotte – David Lorieux (Ceta'Maore)

David Lorieux presented the WUJUA initiative, an inclusive participatory monitoring program developed by the association Ceta'Maore that engages various stakeholders, including nautical operators, boat and kayak rental services, diving clubs, and fishers, in gathering essential data on marine mammal presence, behavior, and threats. It includes training workshops, collaborative field missions, and the use of 'TsiÔno,' a citizen science platform developed by the Parc Naturel Marin de Mayotte. More than 100 trained volunteers contribute to regular monitoring (including species identification, GPS-based data recording, photo-identification of bottlenose dolphins and humpback whales) through dedicated outings or by joining local marine operators on their trips to sea. This initiative, launched in 2023, marks the first structured marine mammal monitoring effort in Mayotte for many years. Collaboration with local communities has also strengthened conservation awareness. Furthermore, the data collected have been contributed to regional and international databases (e.g. HappyWhale), supporting large-scale conservation efforts.

8. Education & Outreach

8.1. Cetizen Project– Julie Martin (Globice)

Julie Martin presented the CET'IZENS project, a 3-years regional project led by GLOBICE and funded by the Agence Française de Développement, aiming at developing educational tools and awareness activities on cetaceans in the WIO. The objective of the project is to export the education tools that Globice has developed in 2022 through the *Campus Cetaces Mobile, a* container graphed by a local artist and design to be used as transportable "mini-education center". Contents and infographics will be made available to the partners to help create new educational activities adapted to their organization and local context. The project partners, Attitude Foundation (Mauritius), Cétamada (Madagascar), Ceta'Maore (Mayotte), Watamu Marine Association (Kenya) and Globice (Reunion) presented the education tools and activities that will be developed as part of this project:

- **Ceta'Maore**: creation of educational kits for schools (activity books) and boat operators (kit composed of identification guides, photo-identification catalogs, etc.)
- **Attitude Foundation**: development of new educational activities in the Marine Discovery Center and the Ecol'O platform (games, quiz, puzzles, etc.)

- **Cetamada**: creation TedTalk like videos on scientific topics to raise interest among the students and young adults in marine ecoloy and biology
- **Watamu Marine Association (KMMREC)**: development of new educational activities in partnership with the Malindi Museum, and a digital platform to centralize the information gathered from and shared with local stakeholders (authorities, communities, etc.)
- **Globice**: organization of the first Humpback Whale Festival in Reunion.

The participants were impressed by the variety of educational tools and innovative outreach activities developed by the partners. It was evident to participants that these resources could be shared, both to inspire others and to be used by other organizations. This should also be kept in mind when designing the new IndoCet website, as some materials can be readily shared via the platform.

9. Humpback Whale Research Activities

Humpback whales have been a focus of IndoCet since the consortium's inception, particularly as photo-identification data were being collected by many organizations across the region. One of the priority actions that was identified in past meetings was to identify a platform that could facilitate data sharing and matching these data. This priority has been developed over the years, together with other collaborative initiatives.

9.1. IWC Comprehensive Assessments and SORP – Tim Collins (WCS)

Tim Collins provided a brief history of prior work on humpback whales by African research groups that informed the most recent IWC Comprehensive Assessment (CA) process. He also provided some context for how ongoing and planned work can be organised to better improve future assessments, including those linked to the IWC Southern Ocean Research Partnership (SORP), which includes a focus on African whales, including both humpback and right whales.

IWC CAs provide the IWC with information on the status of a particular whale population within a particular region, usually an ocean basin. The most recent assessment of humpback whales was a complete assessment of all southern hemisphere humpback whale stocks, including the seven breeding stocks (A-G) and five feeding regions (I-V), including those visiting sub-Saharan Africa, stocks B and C. The CA was completed in 2014, and results were synthesized in 2015. Assessments in their simplest form provide information on whether a previously whaled population has recovered, is still recovering, or is a cause for concern, and to inform management and conservation efforts.

The IWC Scientific Committee uses sophisticated methods, often involving population dynamics models and other statistical analyses to conduct CA's. Data is collected from diverse sources, including genetics, satellite tagging, sighting surveys, photo-identification catalogues, and historical catch records. Population dynamics models are then fit to these data and these in turn lead to a summary of population (stock) status, including estimates of current abundance and "relative abundance" (proportion of pre-exploitation levels). The CA's can be very intensive, often requiring extensive collaboration and data gathering from many sources over several years.

A new phase of work of the IWC SORP initiative, a research collective that supports some of the research needs of the IWC, is designed to revisit important aspects (gaps) of the previous CA, including clarifying the contemporary distribution, migratory routes, and foraging destinations of

humpback whales from BS B and C and to evaluate the extent of mixing of these stocks, especially on Antarctic foraging grounds. This work also aims to examine the influence of population recovery and climate change on these ecological and spatial dynamics. In the broader context, the aim of the work is to improve the availability of data for population assessments and historic catch allocations under the IWC framework, critical information for completing a revised CA of Southern Hemisphere humpback whale populations.

This renewed focus on African humpback whales should be a motivating factor for some of the work on humpback whales conducted by IndoCet partners. It is hoped that ongoing work, including the extensive efforts to match photographic identification efforts using HappyWhale, as well as ongoing satellite tracking work and vessel ship strikes, will contribute to this effort, and ideally spur additional collaborations in the near future.

9.2. Synchronised Whale Counting Day – Angie Gullan (online) – (Dolphin Encountours)

Angie Gullan presented on Synchronised Whale Watching Day and together with the previous data collected and archived, was able to delve into the history and purpose of this whale inspired day.

- SWWD was started in 2008 by Matt Richmond.
- It is an annual coordinated humpback whale survey across East Africa and SW Indian Ocean (Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, Reunion, Mauritius, Madagascar, South Africa.)
- The objective raises awareness and involvement of people in the region.
- SWWD contributes to our collective understanding of the seasonal movements of humpback whales, and insights into interannual variability in whale occurrence.
- Between 2009 and 2025, 17 SWWD's have been undertaken, this has resulted in 4,826 overall sightings with an average of 284 seen per year.
- 2025 observers recorded 447 sightings, including 196 adults and 27 calves. There were 85 whale watchers that spent ±76 hours collectively watching whales!

Some discussion points included how to manage double counts, agreeing a suitable date for annual counts and how to return completed data sheets in a timely fashion. There was also a discussion about conducting the count on a weekend rather than a weekday in order to facilitate more participation. A proposal was made to allow some flexibility to plan the count ±1 or 2 days around the chosen date, depending on whether volunteers or staff are conducting the counts and to take weather forecasts into account.

It was further discussed to **extend the initiative by conducting several counts throughout the season** (perhaps once a month) to achieve a more representative understanding of humpback whale occurrence. Going forward, together with IndoCet and other stakeholders **a future meeting will be held to discuss upcoming SWWD's.**

9.3. Modelling humpback whale interannual variability –Vanessa Estrade (Globice)

Vanessa Estrade, from GLOBICE, presented the preliminary results of a study looking at the influence of environmental conditions of the feeding grounds on humpback whale occurrence on the breeding ground of Reunion Island. Twenty years (2004-2024) of data on humpback whale encounter rates (i.e., number of sightings/ survey effort) in Reunion island were analyzed in relation to environmental factors: Sea Surface Temperature, Chlorophyll a concentration, Index of Southern Annular Mode and the minimal sea ice extent between 0° and 90°E and 50° and 70°S in Antarctica. Three time-lags were tested (6 months, 18 months and 30 months). The main assumption was that migration to lower latitudes (Reunion) during the austral winter is influenced by feeding conditions in Antarctica during the austral summer. A strong interannual variability in

the encounter rate of whales is reported in Reunion. The GAM model indicates that the encounter rate of whales during winter of the year Y is significantly positively correlated with Chlorophyll a concentration during summer Y-2 and negatively correlated with the minimal sea ice extent in summer Y in Antarctica. Because Chlorophyll a, is at the base of food chain, and could thus influence krill abundance with a 2 year-lag time, and the sea ice extent influences the availability of krill, this result suggests that good feeding conditions (i.e., abundance and availability of krill) is a key factors that might explain variations in whale occurrence around Reunion island.

Attendants showed a keen interest in these results. The robustness of using chlorophyll *a* concentration as a proxy of krill abundance was discussed. Even if this index is largely used in scientific literature, some studies have shown that it might not be a good proxy to krill abundance. The influence of sea ice extent on krill availability, was debated. Some researchers, who work on southern right whale in South Africa, use the marginal sea extent instead. These discussions were useful and will help to improve the model. The study highlights the importance of monitoring long term occurrence data throughout the region, which would help understand migration patterns.

9.4. Humpback whale supergroups – Elisa Seyboth (MRI Whale Unit, Univ. of Pretoria)

Elisa Seyboth, on behalf of her authors (namely Ken Findlay, Alex Vogel, Daniela Abras, David Hurwitz, Els Vermeulen, Jean Tresfon, Tess Gridley, and Simon Elwen). presented information on humpback whale super-groups. These, as per Findlay et al. (2017), are defined as groups comprising 20+, tightly aggregated, feeding individuals of the species. They have been formally reported on the west coast of South Africa since 2011, with data also previously available for 2013 and 2015. In this study, spatiotemporal patterns of super-groups on the west coast of South Africa were investigated for the period between July 2015 and June 2022. For this, records from scientific surveys, whale-watching operators, and citizen science reports were compiled. Sightings of 239 humpback whale super-groups were collated for this period. Super-groups appeared from August to April, peaking between October and January, and the seasonality of their occurrence seems to have expanded in comparison to previously published data. Although the effect of inconsistent effort throughout the study is unknown, results identify the overall regularity and spatiotemporal patterns of super-group formations, while highlighting the need for improved, collaborative and systematic data collection to gain deeper insights into this mid-latitude feeding phenomenon. This work was published by Marine Mammal Science and can be accessed at onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/mms.70018.

9.5. Whale song diffusion – Adrian Fajeau (online)

Partners from the region have been collaborating for many years on a study aiming to assess spatial and temporal variations in humpback whale song to provide insighted on population structure and connectivity in the western Indian Ocean, and with adjacent breeding stocks. To compare song structure across regions, sub-regions and years, autonomous recorders were deployed at 17 sites during 2015-2021 austral winters. These included multiple year recordings in Reunion, Mauritius, Madakascar, Kenya, Mozambique and South Africa by IndoCet members, and by partners in western Australia and Namibia. The results showed that four different songs and 15 different phrase types were identified. Three of the songs spread eastward, from the eastern African coast to western Australia, over the years. A manuscript is being finalized and will be circulated to all co-authors very soon.

9.6. Satellite telemetry – Violaine Dulau (Globice)

Violaine Dulau provided a brief overview of the existing humpback whale satellite tracking dataset available from the region. Efforts have been made to make these data accessible on the IndoCet

website through an interactive map (which is yet to be updated with recent data received from Mayotte, the Comoros, and eastern South Africa). She acknowledged the contributions of the data owners for their trust and willingness to share their data, even though some of it has not yet been published and related projects are still ongoing. This collective dataset is currently being used to assess interactions with marine traffic as part of the QWIO program. It has also contributed to the *Protecting Blue Corridors* initiative.

This work will also inform the ongoing efforts of the Ship Strike working group of the IWC, and in turn will be of use for identifying where additional mitigation measures are necessary.

9.7. HappyWhale

From its inception, IndoCet identified as a priority action the need to establish a framework for a regional humpback whale photo-identification catalogue given the amount of humpback whale data collected by numerous partners in the region. To achieve this goal, the network has teamed up with HappyWhale to match humpback whale photo-ID data from the SWIO (as well as more broadly), a collaboration that will help estimate population size and migration links between regions ahead of the next IWC CA. These activities will in turn support the ambitions of IWC SORP, which will focus some of its energies on improving the current understanding of Antarctic humpback whales that visit African shores during the Austral breeding season (see above).

9.7.1. Update on HappyWhale results – Elisa Seyboth and Alex Vogel (HappyWhale)

Alex Vogel and Elisa Seyboth provided an update on a broad collaborative initiative focused on improving our understanding of the movement patterns of, and connectivity between, humpback whales from the Eastern Atlantic Ocean and Western Indian Ocean breeding stocks (BS B and C, respectively). This has been a wonderfully collaborative effort and makes use of the automated photo-identification matching system within the HappyWhale application (happywhale.com). A total of 20,979 encounters of 13,439 individual humpback whales photographed between 1988 and March 2025 along the African East and West coasts and western Indian Ocean islands were collated and analysed. These were matched against 110,239 identified humpback whales in the Happywhale database (at the time of analysis). Of these, 38 individuals moved between low-latitude breeding grounds associated with BS-B and C. Additionally, two and four individuals crossed the Atlantic from the breeding grounds of BS-B and BS-C to Brazil, respectively, while one and three individuals crossed the Indian Ocean, moving between the breeding grounds of BS-C and East and West Australia, respectively. Remarkably, one individual moved between Tanzania and Colombia, and another between Kenya and Eastern Australia. Connectivity to Southern Ocean feeding grounds was also assessed, indicating movements between breeding grounds of BS-B and C to feeding areas II (60°W–0°) (n = 3), III (0–70°E) (n = 5), and South Georgia and South Sandwich Islands (n = 1). These data clearly show connectivity between BS-B and C (and other stocks) and underscore that individual whales may not always follow the generally accepted north-south migration. IndoCet group agreed to have a follow-up meeting soon after WIOMSA to discuss important points related to this work, as co-authorship and the progress of the manuscript, aimed to be a product of this joint effort and ready for submission in the first semester of 2026.

9.7.2. Regional update and new features – Ted Cheeseman (online) – (HappyWhale)

Ted Cheeseman of HappyWhale presented on the current state of AI computer vision image recognition for individual identification of cetaceans. Humpback whale fluke identification has proven extremely successful (https://rdcu.be/cCOtw) for work in the Western Indian Ocean, with 9316 identified individuals in 11786 encounters to date. The persistently high discovery rate of

new individuals in this dataset suggests a large population. Potential for a regional abundance estimate was discussed, following methodology currently in development by a group of statisticians led by Lynden Brooks for the Eastern Australia humpback whale population using data from HappyWhale.

Image recognition developments for other cetaceans was also discussed, based on a multi-species dorsal fin and lateral view image recognition algorithm (https://besjournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/2041-210X.14167) that has been successful with Indian Ocean Humpback dolphins in South Africa as well as several other cetacean populations around the world. Ted presented a new graphical user interface for management of large datasets between collaborators and for unprocessed datasets. An emphasis on domain expertise and expert review of matches was discussed, where the AI image recognition is capable of finding the best proposed match but ideally includes the review and expert judgement of an experienced data manager with knowledge of the study population.

10. Key Outcomes & follow-up actions

Building on the discussions and outcomes of the meeting, several priorities actions and strategic directions have been identified to guide the development of IndoCet activities over the coming year. These actions aim to strengthen the network's coordination and engagement, enhance data sharing, and promote collaborative research and conservation efforts for cetaceans across the Indian Ocean region.

10.1. Key Outcomes

1. **Strengthening collaboration and engagement**
    - Maintain network momentum through active member engagement and regular communication.
    - Encourage member contributions: publications, metadata updates, stranding reports, and newsletter items.
    - Promote the development of tools to facilitate data sharing and visualisation
    - Establish thematic working groups within IndoCet to address key priority actions and develop IndoCet collaborative activities (NeMMO, synchronized whale counts, stranding network, communication, etc.).

2. **Enhancing communication and visibility**
    - Refurbish and revamp the IndoCet website to function as both research portal and public outreach hub.
    - Expand communication tools (newsletter, webinars) to maintain member interaction and visibility.

3. **Advancing research and monitoring effort**
    - Further develop the IndoCet stranding network and promote systematic data collection on stranded animals, as well as cetacean–human interactions (e.g., bycatch, vessel strikes, disturbance). This includes outreach to colleagues in Somalia and the Horn of Africa.
    - Consolidate and expand ongoing collaborative activities such as synchronized counting days and other regional monitoring programs.

- Support the NeMMO initiative by fostering partnerships with "platforms of opportunity" to extend offshore data collection. Encourage the deployment of trained marine mammal observers aboard vessels following standardized protocols.
- Development of a common publication describing humpback whale connectivity between breeding stocks across the sub-Saharan Africa region, to be presented at the next IWC SC (April/May 2026).
- Revise the methodological protocol of the regional "Synchronised Whale Counting Day"

4. **Developing a regional conservation framework**
    - Build consensus for the creation and structure of a Regional Cetacean Action Plan, aligning with international conservation frameworks, regional and national priorities.
    - Encourage researchers to initiate new regional projects in collaboration with other IndoCet members, with the goal of centralizing and analyzing data under a common methodological and analytical framework.

5. **Strengthening institutional partnerships**
    - Explore the establishment of a more formal link between IndoCet and WIOMSA, including the possibility of holding future IndoCet meetings within the framework of the WIOMSA Scientific Symposium as well as supporting regional initiatives that focus on marine mammal science. This could also including having a respected regional marine mammal researcher on the editorial board of the WIOMSA journal.
    - Maintain and strengthen relationships with regional and international organizations such as the IWC and SORP, ensuring IndoCet activities are recognized through annual updates presented to the IWC Scientific Committee.
    - Identify key areas for collaboration and data sharing with other regional initiatives, fostering synergies that enhance scientific understanding and management effectiveness.

The continued growth of IndoCet depends on the collective engagement of its members and the consolidation of partnerships within the wider WIO conservation and research community. By implementing these activities, IndoCet can strengthen its role as a platform for cetacean research and conservation in the region.

10.2. Follow-up Actions

- Formalise an agreement between IndoCet and WIOMSA to support regional initiatives that focus on marine mammal science and conservation, and provide support to the WIOMSA scientific journal.
- Prepare a concept note for a regional marine mammal status report and associate outreach to partners such as the Nairobi Convention, IOC, IWC, and WIOMSA for endorsement and collaboration and explore funding opportunities.
- Ensure effective coordination with IWC-SORP and prepare an update on IndoCet activities for presentation at the next IWC SC. Facilitate contributions from IndoCet members, and work to ensure the process is transparent and participative.

- Create a working group to advance the development of the manuscript on humpback whale connectivity using HappyWhale.
- Propose a new organization and design for the IndoCet website and develop tools to facilitate metadata updates and visualization, in collaboration with HappyWhale (funded by AFD).
- Continue facilitation of the IndoCet webinar series to maintain member engagement, share project updates, and encourage capacity-building within the network.
- Plan for the next IndoCet regional meeting, tentatively scheduled in conjunction with a future WIOMSA or the Humpback Whale World Congress.

ANNEX 1.

INDOCET - WIOMSA SPECIAL SESSION
- 3 October 2025, Mombasa, Kenya-

9:00-9:10	**Welcome, round table**	
	IndoCet activities and networking	
9:10-9:20	Introduction to the IndoCet network	Violaine Dulau
9:20-9:30	Mini-symposium feedback: do we need a regional cetacean action plan ?	Tim Collins
9:30-9:40	NeMMO – Network of Marine Mammal Observers	Violaine and Gwen Penry
9:40-4:50	Passive acoustic monitoring	Emmanuelle Leroy
9:50-9:05	Regional strandings	Stephanie Ploen (online)
10:05-10:15	Whale disentanglement	Mike Meyer (online)
	Linking with other networks	
10:15-10:20	Humpback dolphins network: HudoNet	Shanan Atkins
10:20-10:25	IMMAs - Important Marine Mammal Areas	Gill Braulik
10:25-10:35	Whale watching network from IORA	Audrey Cartraud
10:30-11:00	**Coffee break**	
	Sharing updates from current studies and organisations	
11:00-11:08	Sperm whale study (PhD)	Karthik Ashok
11:08-11:16	Sperm whales of Mascarenes (abundance, trends, threats)	Lana Barteneva
11:16-11:24	Interactions with fisheries: Coexistence & Intop projects	Paul Tixier (online)
11:24-11:32	Pygmy killer whales in South Africa	Gwen Penry
11:32-11:40	A global view of Madagascar's scientific project	Anjara Saloma
11:40-11:48	Update on Marine Mammal Research and Conservation in Kenya	Mike Mwangombe
11:48-11:56	WUJUA participative monitoring in Mayotte	David Lorieux
11:56-12:04	Whale entanglements in Tanzania	Davis Orio
	Education and Citizen Science	
12:12-12:30	Cet'izen	Julie Martin and partners

12:30-14:00	**Lunch break**	
14:00-14:30	Website refurbishing: what info do we want to share ?	General discussion
	Communicating within and outside IndoCet	General discussion
14:30-14:35	HWWC: Humpback Whale World Conference	Anjara Saloma
	Regional work on humpback whales	
14:35-14:50	Synchronised Whale Counting Day: results and discussion	Angie Gullan (online)
14:50-15:00	Modelling interannual variability in humpback whale occurrence	Vanessa Estrade
15:00-15:10	Humpback whale super-groups on the west coast of South Africa	Elisa Seyboth
15:10-15:20	Regional diffusion of humpback whale song	Adrian Fajeau (online)
15:20-15:25	Satellite tracking	Violaine Dulau
15:30-16:00	**Afternoon tea**	
	Regional work on humpback whales (continue)	
16:00-16:15	Background to the last IWC comprehensive assessment and SORP	Tim Collins
16:15-16:30	HappyWhale regional update	Elisa Seyboth
16:30-16:40	Communicating HappyWhale results	General discussion
16:40-17:00	HappyWhale new features and identifying analytical needs	Ted Cheeseman (online)
17:00-17:15	Other potential analysis using HappyWhale	Ted Cheeseman/Salvatore Cerchio (online)
17:20-17:30	**Wrapping up/ Identify priority actions**	
17:30	**End of the Special Session**	

ANNEX 2

Présents sur place (*: personnes financées par le projet) :

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<u>Présents en ligne :</u>

Salvatore Cerchio – AACF

Alex Vogel – HappyWhale

Angie Gullan – Dolphin Encountours Research Center

Els Vermulen – MRI Whale Unit UP

Katie Reeve-Arnold – All Out Africa

Maeva Terrapon – University of St Andrews

Michael Meyer – International Whaling Commission

Michel Vely – Megaptera

Stephanie Plön – Researcher

Ted Cheeseman – HappyWhale

Virginie Plot – Globice

Adrian Fajeau – independant (ex. Globice)

Karthik Ashok – University of Curtin

Nakia Cullain – MAR

Paul Tixier – IRD

Brian Odhiambo

Chris Wilkison – MRI Whale Unit UP

Hannah Yee