

AFCD reports to Expert Group on Conservation of Marine Mammals on investigation findings of cause of death of Bryde's whale last year

The Expert Group on Conservation of Marine Mammals held a meeting today (July 19). The Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) reported to the Expert Group on the findings of the investigation into the cause of death of the Bryde's whale that appeared in Hong Kong waters in July last year, as well as the progress of the Government's work in strengthening conservation of marine mammals.

After comprehensive consideration of the report of the Ocean Park Conservation Foundation Hong Kong (OPCFHK) commissioned by the AFCD last year to investigate the cause of death of the Bryde's whale, as well as the opinions of two experts from Australia and Spain, the Expert Group noted that the Bryde's whale was struck by a fast-moving vessel between the morning of July 30 and the morning of July 31 last year, the animal's back and spine was thus injured and instant death was caused. The type of the vessel concerned cannot be determined in the analysis. Nonetheless, no whale-watching activity was detected during the four days prior to the death of the Bryde's whale. Moreover, fishing vessels generally do not travel at such high speeds, and fishing sampans and speedboats equipped with outboard engines could not cause such large wounds. Therefore, the wounds were more likely caused by other types of vessels.

Whales per se are not species that reside in Hong Kong waters. Their entry into Hong Kong waters is likely due to special circumstances, such as health problems, disorientation or young whales losing their caretakers. The international principle in dealing with this type of situation is to avoid any human disturbance as far as possible, strengthen monitoring and patrols, and allow the whales to swim back to suitable habitats on their own under minimal disturbance as far as possible.

A spokesman for the AFCD said, "Between the first sighting of the Bryde's whale in Sai Kung waters last year until its death, the AFCD worked with the OPCFHK as well as local and Mainland marine conservation experts to closely monitor the health condition of the whale and consider suitable measures to protect its safety, and worked jointly with relevant government departments to advise the public not to go out to sea for whale watching and conduct water activities in the relevant waters. On July 29 and 30, the AFCD further co-ordinated with relevant government departments to adopt special administrative measures to set up a management area in the waters frequented by the whale, where patrols were stepped up and all vessels entering the area were requested to leave immediately.

"Based on the experience of this incident, the department has strengthened its work in four aspects, including formulating a response plan with relevant departments to deal with similar incidents in future, reviewing the relevant powers of the AFCD under current legislation, sending staff to the Mainland and overseas to learn about measures for protecting marine mammals and applying them to the response plan, and taking measures to raise public awareness and knowledge of wildlife conservation, etc."

Since July last year, the AFCD has followed up on the above four aspects as follows:

(1) Formulate response plan: Making reference to the opinions of local, Mainland and overseas experts, as well as the actual local situation, the Government has formulated a response plan based on different scenarios where non-resident cetaceans appear in Hong Kong waters. The plan provides guidelines for interdepartmental co-ordination and response actions, stipulating the specific roles and actions of the relevant departments in monitoring, on-site operations, support, and dissemination of information to the public, with a view to handling similar situations more quickly and effectively in future. In particular, the AFCD, together with the Marine Department and the Marine Police, tried out the principles and procedures of the response plan when handling a whale sighting case in Southern District in September last year, where swift deployment and actions were taken in respect of monitoring, patrolling and disseminating information, with good effect. The Government will listen to the advice of the Expert Group, and will also maintain communication with relevant organisations and experts to ensure that the response plan meets actual needs and is kept up-to-date;

(2) Legislative review: The Government has reviewed the relevant legislation for the protection of marine mammals and preliminarily suggested that the Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation should be given more powers to deal with exceptional circumstances, including the designation of temporary restriction areas more quickly where necessary through simplified procedures, and imposing restrictions on vessel navigation and relevant activities within such areas. These measures aim to provide better protection and a safe environment as well as reducing human disturbance to species that accidentally enter local waters, such as whales that are not found in Hong Kong waters normally. The Government also proposed that whale-watching activities should be prohibited to avoid causing stress to whales and endangering their health and safety. The Government expects to consult the Expert Group on the specific proposals for the relevant legislative amendments within this year;

(3) Exchange with experienced agencies: The AFCD earlier sent staff to the Beibu Gulf Cetacean Research and Protection Center at Beihai, Guangxi, and Southern Marine Parks, Queensland, Australia, to exchange and learn from their experience in dealing with marine mammal stranding; legislation, management and research on the protection of such animals; as well as communication with the public, publicity and education, such as how to observe the health condition of wild whales and respond to whale sighting reports according to a tiered mechanism, etc. The department has suitably

applied these relevant experiences in their follow-up work such as formulation of a response plan and legislative review, etc; and

(4) Enhance publicity and education: With regard to the whale sighting case in Southern District in September last year, the AFCD immediately issued press releases and posts on social media as well as distributing leaflets at nearby piers to urge the public not to go out to the sea for whale watching, whereas the Marine Department also called on vessels to reduce speed via a broadcast system. The overall response was satisfactory. The AFCD has also conducted a series of public education activities, targetting not only the general public, but also students and teachers, to deepen their understanding of Hong Kong's marine environment and wildlife, and raise their awareness of respecting, caring for and appreciating marine resources. Among others, the AFCD organised the Marine Wildlife Appreciation Festival from January to March this year to promote the message of marine conservation to the public. The department will also continue to strengthen the work of mainstreaming marine conservation awareness in future.

The Expert Group acknowledged the department's progress in the four aspects of work and discussed the response plan in detail. The AFCD will take into account views of the Expert Group when dealing with similar situations in future, and will continue to work with the Expert Group to continuously improve the response measures.

The Expert Group is responsible for advising the Government on conservation of marine mammals in Hong Kong waters, including response planning for handling of non-resident marine mammal sightings in Hong Kong waters, assessment of associated potential risks as well as the formulation of appropriate measures, guidelines, protocols, and best practices, etc. A list of its membership is at the Annex.

Relevant documents of the Expert Group meeting, including the reports prepared and opinions raised by the AFCD, the OPCFHK and the two overseas experts in relation to the cause of death of the Bryde's whale, have been uploaded to the AFCD's webpage (www.afcd.gov.hk/english/conservation/con_mar/con_mar_chi/con_mar_chi_chi/con_mar_chi_chi_rep.html) for public inspection.