

AFCD reports to Expert Group on Conservation of Marine Mammals on progress of work and way forward

The Expert Group on Conservation of Marine Mammals held its second meeting today (October 29). The Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) reported to the Expert Group on the progress and way forward of the Government's work on enhancing conservation of marine mammals, including exchanges with agencies with relevant experience, raising public awareness and knowledge of conservation of wildlife (including marine mammals), and review of legislation in relation to the protection of marine mammals.

The specific progress and way forward points were as follows:

(1) Exchange with agencies with relevant experience: 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 handling marine mammal stranding cases; legislation, management and research on the protection of cetaceans; as well as communication with the public, publicity and education, etc. The department has suitably applied the relevant experiences in their follow-up work such as the formulation of a response plan and legislative review, etc. To prepare for future operations involving field rescues, rehabilitation, and release of stranded whales and dolphins, the department plans to organise a visit to Sanya, Hainan, as there was a recent successful release of an injured short-finned pilot whale following its rescue and rehabilitation during the period from January to May 2024;

(2) Enhancing publicity and education: The AFCD has conducted a series of public education activities, targeting not only the general public, but also government departments, marine users, students and teachers, with a view to deepening their understanding of Hong Kong's marine environment and wildlife, raising their awareness of respecting, caring for and appreciating marine resources, and promoting the best practices that minimise the disturbance to cetaceans and fostering a sense of shared stewardship on the protection of wild cetaceans and their habitats. Among others, the AFCD organised the Marine Wildlife Appreciation Festival from January to March 2024 to promote the message of marine conservation to the public. The AFCD will also prepare to organise a Marine Wildlife Appreciation Roving Exhibition to display the preserved skeleton of Bryde's whale found in Hong Kong waters in July last year to further raise public awareness on protection of marine mammals; and

(3) Legislative review: The Government has commenced the review of the legislation in relation to the protection of marine mammals. The preliminary suggestions are for the Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation to be given new power to designate certain areas of Hong Kong waters as a

"Temporary Marine Restricted Area" for the purpose of protecting cetaceans when necessary, such as the situation of a non-resident whale appearing in Hong Kong waters, conferring a legal status on the existing Code of Conduct for Dolphin Watching, and exploring the feasibility of a prohibition on watching non-resident cetaceans.

During the meeting, the Expert Group supported the relevant recommendations and direction of work proposed by the AFCD. The AFCD expressed gratitude for the constructive advice offered by the Expert Group and will take into account the views and continue to work with the Expert Group, with a view to enhancing the work of marine mammal conservation.