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MEDIA RELEASE

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JAPAN NOT CATCHING ENDANGERED WHALES

The Director General of the Institute of Cetacean Research in Tokyo, Dr. Seiji Ohsumi, today responded to criticism that Japan was sampling an endangered species of whale.

"The last commercial hunts of sei whales were in the mid-1970s at which point they were estimated to be around 9000. More than 25 years since then numbers of the sei whale have grown to approximately 30,000. Currently, they have the second highest biomass in the region, just short of sperm whales," Dr. Ohsumi said. IWC rules (not the Government of Japan as claimed by Greenpeace) require that research proposals be kept confidential until the beginning of the Plenary Meeting of the IWC, after they have been reviewed by its Scientific Committee. Contrary to these rules, the research proposal was leaked to the press by World Wildlife Fund (WWF).

"Japan's plan to increase its whale research program is based on urgent scientific need to collect data on the competition between whales and fisheries," said Dr. Ohsumi. "It is estimated that whales consume 3 to 5 times the amount of marine resources as are caught for human consumption, so our whale research is providing valuable information required for improving the management of all our marine resources."

"Research on the role of whales in the ecosystem and in particular the consumption of fish by whales is supported many international fisheries organizations including the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Even the IWC adopted a resolution last year making the study of interactions between whales and fisheries a priority. Japan is simply doing what the IWC said was a priority," Dr. Ohsumi said.

Over the past two years, a total of 140 minke whales, 93 Bryde's whales and 13 sperm whales were sampled. The proposed program involves sampling of 150 minke whales, 50 Bryde's whales, 50 sei and 10 sperm whales each year.

"These species were chosen because they are abundant in the North Pacific and they are very large animals -this means they consume huge amounts of marine resources," he said. "The planned increase in the number of minke whales to be sampled is required so that inshore areas where the competition between whales and fisheries is likely to be greatest can be sampled."

Calculations show that the effect of the research catches on the abundance of whales will be negligible. Even with these catches, the stocks will continue to increase," he added. "Based on the success of the past research and increasingly strong support from international fisheries organizations, including FAO, for research to improve multi-species approaches to management, Japan is convinced that its research effort should be increased."

For more information, contact Joji Morishita, Deputy Director of the Far Seas Fisheries Division of Japan's Fisheries Agency.

Mr Morishita is at the Ascot Metropolitan Hotel, Auckland, New Zealand +64 9 300 8800 until 8pm Friday 1 March. From Monday Contact Mr Morishita as Far Seas Fisheries Division, Fisheries Agency, Tokyo +81-3-3502-2443