

The 1st National Philippine Marine Mammal Stranding Network Symposium

From October 5 to 7, 2013, the 1st National Philippine Marine Mammal Stranding Network (PMMSN) Symposium was hosted by Ocean Adventure in its facilities at Subic Bay, Freeport. Ninety two (92) people representing governmental organizations, local government units (LGUs), non-governmental organizations, and academe participated in this Symposium to share experiences and data, recruit new members, and review the mission and objectives of the PMMSN.

The first day consisted mainly of a keynote speech, plenary talks and status reports from various PMMSN Chapters. The **keynote speech of Director Asis Perez**, the head of the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources, the mandated national agency in charge of protecting and managing cetaceans in the Philippines, was read by BFAR 3 Regional Director Remedios Ongtangco, in his absence. The first plenary talk, **'Appreciating the past and anticipating the future of PMMSN'** was presented by Gail Laule, the President of the Wildlife In Need Foundation and executive Vice President of Ocean Adventure, which are core member organizations of the PMMSN. The other plenary talk, **'Of strandings and sentinels: what they reveal so far,'** was given by Lem Aragones, the President of the PMMSN and an associate professor at the University of the Philippines Institute of Environmental Science and Meteorology. The second half of the first day was allocated for the sharing of marine mammal stranding data and experiences from 12 chapters from all over the country.

In day two of the symposium, technical papers on various aspects of marine mammal strandings in the Philippines were presented. The topics included stranding protocols, rehabilitation, emerging diseases from stranded cetaceans, governmental related issues, impacts of dolphin watching and dolphin watching protocols, overview of stranding networks, and information education and communications (IECs) for marine mammals. The second day culminated with an empowerment exercise and workshop wherein all participants had a vote on the priority setting for PMMSN in the next five years. The choices were (1) **IEC and public education**, (2) **governmental issues related to strandings**, (3) **research and collaboration**, and (4) **stranding protocols and rehabilitation**. Interestingly, the results showed that the various choices were similarly of high priority to the variedly mixed participants. These topics also served as the groupings for the concurrent workshops that followed. The facilitators for the various groups with the help of their assistants came up with summarized outputs (see Table 1).

On the third day, the results of the workshops were presented on plenary. The IEC and public education group (facilitated by Bianca Espinos and Reynante Ramilo) tackled the lack in cetacean knowledge especially amongst locals (i.e. fisherfolk and children) which can lead to improper response to stranding and even unhealthy consumption of meat. The actions proposed to bridge this gap include the development of a Communication Plan and comprehensive IEC materials, the creation of a website/database for sharing IEC materials among BFAR chapters, orientation of involved personnel per chapter and the consequent assessment of IEC campaigns per region. The governmental issues group (facilitated by Regional Directors Jovy Ayson and Fatma Idris) recognized that the utilization of science-based legislation and management, the active participation of and task delineation among LGUs, national agencies and communities, and the allocation of funds for training, logistics and facilities are

effective actions of government bodies that must be continued. In order to do this, they proposed LGU allocation of funds for marine mammal conservation and management, capacity building of LGUs and other stakeholders, establishment of rehabilitation facilities and provision of incentives to responders. More importantly, it was emphasized that national, regional and provincial programs on marine mammal stranding should be established and that collaboration among government agencies, NGOs and private entities should be strengthened.

The research and collaboration group (facilitated by Lem Aragonés), on the other hand, identified the lack of funding, of committed and highly-trained personnel and of a data repository and laboratory as the main challenges that they are facing. In line with this, the development of the Marine Mammal Research Center in the country has been proposed as well as the establishment of protocols (i.e., cetacean watching protocols) and field guides (i.e., sampling and disease recognition) for responders. It was also emphasized that there is need to develop educational modules from primary to tertiary levels, and for personnel/staff to undergo continuous training to ensure comprehensive learning on marine mammals.

For the stranding response group (facilitated by Leo Suarez and Mariel Buccat-Flores), it was identified that the main issues and concerns were the availability of trained responders, proper species identification, assessment and action for the stranded animals, as well as the proper decision-making and behavior of responders to set good examples to the public. The proposed solutions include the conduction of more trainings not only to government employees but also to NGOs and private individuals; the use of innovative manuals, applications and networked photo documentation to make species identification and assessment easier; and to improve coordination between the LGU, responders and trained veterinarians to maximize resources and perform more efficiently.

Ultimately, the last part of the SYMPOSIUM discussed and teased apart the various issues presented in the plenary session. Eventually, the group agreed on the wording for the **PMMSN Covenant or Subic Declaration**.

“We, the incorporators, Board of Directors, and members of the Philippine Marine Mammal Stranding Network Inc. (PMMSN) are committed to supporting and advancing the goals of the PMMSN as stated in the following:

- 1) Develop the capability on a national, regional and local level to respond to every stranded marine mammal for rescue, release and/or rehabilitation
- 2) Standardize and systematically collect data regarding marine mammal strandings – alive or dead
- 3) Collate all data on stranding events nationwide and submit to the PMMSN Database
- 4) Educate the public, particularly coastal inhabitants, on the importance of marine mammal conservation
- 5) Promote and participate in research and conservation activities concerning marine mammal strandings and marine mammals in general

- 6) Empower and develop capability of pertinent governmental organizations, the private sector, and PMMSN chapters to organize and implement marine mammal stranding response.

We are all concerned about the protection, conservation and management of the marine environment and the animals that inhabit it. We support the One World Health view in recognition of the importance of marine mammals as valuable sentinels of ocean and human health. We recognize our shared responsibility to assist marine mammals in distress, and to make our best efforts to care for and protect them from needless suffering.

We are committed to carrying out our mission as first responders, rehabilitators, and providers of medical care with the highest degree of skill and expertise and to continually raise the bar of best practices in stranding response. We are committed to addressing difficult issues in decision-making including the humane euthanasia of animals suffering with no hope of recovery.

We recognize that every stranding event is a valuable opportunity to raise public awareness on the importance of marine mammals and to motivate individuals and communities to respect, protect, and conserve our precious marine resources. We are committed to ensuring that every stranding event is an opportunity to gather critical information and biological data that contributes to the advancement of scientific knowledge of marine mammals and the marine environment.

We urge our government agencies to address the issues set forth in this covenant with appropriate and consistent laws and directives in order to support the goals of the PMMSN.

We join together now at the 1st National Philippine Marine Mammal Stranding Network Symposium to sign this covenant this 11th day of October 2013 at Subic Bay, Philippines”.

Table 1. Summary of the main outputs from the breakout group workshops held during the 1st PMMSN National Symposium (Oct 5-7, 2013).

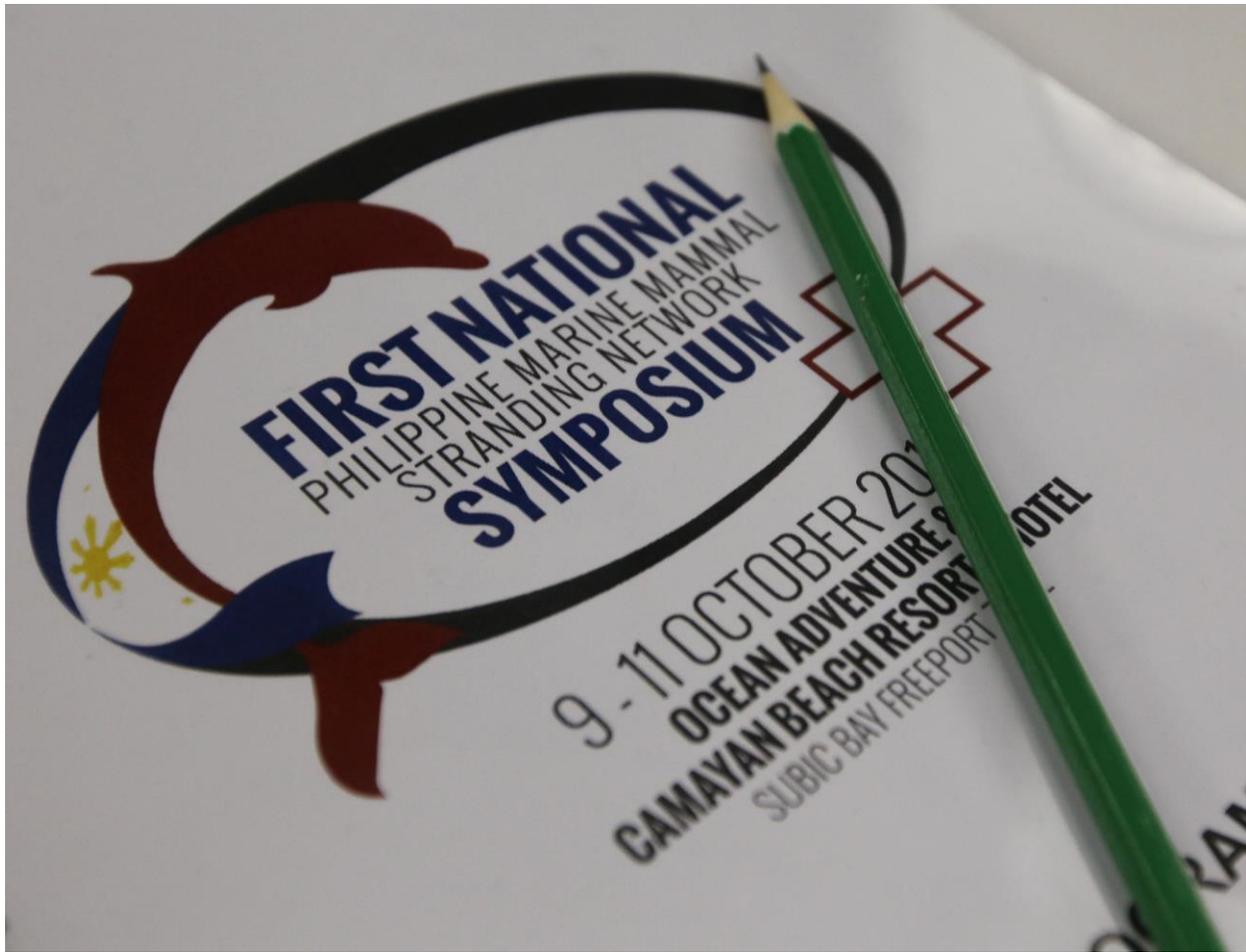
| | What worked | Challenges | Action Points | Point Institutions | Time-frame |
|----------------------------------|--|--|---|--|-------------------|
| Stranding response & vet aspects | -PMMSN trainings -Protocols | - Proper animal assessment and identification - Empathy; - Medical management -More first-responders and trained veterinarians | - More trainings and use of colored and waterproofed IEC materials, manuals; use of standard template for photodocumentation - Recruitment and training of locals | Ocean Adventure , PMMSN | 1 year |
| IEC and public education | -Some brochures -Updated posters -The existing PMMSN Facebook group | Understanding of IEC materials - Lack of updated and more organized dissemination of materials and information | - Translation of materials in local dialect -Use of other creative media -Establishment of a website | Ocean Adventure PMMSN IEC committee and Regional Chapters | 1 year |
| Governmental Issues | -Funding for training available -Participation and collaboration of LGU, national agencies and local communities -Science-based legislation and management | - Additional funding - Lack of capacity building - Absence of national policy/directive on MarMams (promotion of PMMSN to other regions) | -Fund allocation -Capacity building of LGUs and other stakeholders - Establishment of national, regional and provincial program on MarMams (incorporation of MarMam stranding in CRM) | BFAR, LGUs | 3 years |

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|--------------------------|--|---|--|---------------------------------|-----------|
| | | -Lack of rehabilitation facilities (in some regions) and incentives to responders | program) -Preparation of project proposals for facilities and provision of incentives | | |
| Research & collaboration | -Collection of samples and stranding data -Ongoing research studies | -Continuous analyses of samples -Lack of repository area for samples collected -Difficulty of first responders to obtain data (including identification of diseases) -Lack of specialized courses on MarMams -Lack of research result dissemination | -Establish the Philippine Marine Mammal Research Laboratory at UP IESM -More training/ capacity-building -Coordination with CHED, PRC and colleges to offer specialized subjects/courses; educational modules -Development of Network and Research Database (website) | UP IESM, BFAR, CHED, PRC, DepEd | 2-3 years |

Summarized by: Lemnuel V Aragonés



Group photo of the participants of the 1st National Symposium of the PMMSN, Oct 9-11, 2013 hosted by Ocean Adventure held at Camayan Beach Resort and Hotel.



A photo of the cover of the Programme for the 1st National PMMSN Symposium (9-11 October 2013).



Bianca Espinos facilitating a group workshop regarding training and capacity building of PMMSN Chapters.