

# Culturally Important Species in the Pacific Islands



## Synopsis of the issue

There are a variety of species in the Pacific Islands that receive a large amount of public attention as a result of their cultural, political, economic, or conservation significance. In reality, all organisms play an important ecological role regardless of size or human characteristics. The species presented below represent only a minute subset of the immense species diversity found in the Pacific Islands.

**Whales**—Eleven great whale species occur in the South Pacific including blue, humpback, sperm, southern right, fin, sei, Antarctic minke, dwarf minke, Bryde's, pygmy Bryde's, and pygmy right whales. Most populations of great whales in the Southern Hemisphere collapsed and remain severely depleted as a result of commercial whaling that removed 1.5 million whales in the last century. The South Pacific is a critical habitat containing the migratory paths and key breeding grounds of a number of whale species. Whale watching is a sustainable economic activity that has the potential for growth.

In July 2000 the International Whaling Commission (IWC) considered a proposal presented by Australia and New Zealand for a South Pacific Whale Sanctuary. Despite considerable support, the proposal did not obtain the necessary majority vote required. Recently, the Cook Islands, Samoa, French Polynesia, Niue, and Papua New Guinea each designated their territorial waters as whale sanctuaries—in essence creating a region-wide sanctuary one country at a time. For some countries with economic ties to the whaling nation of Japan, the decision to create a whale sanctuary becomes very difficult. The area of the proposed South Pacific Sanctuary extends from the equator to 40 degrees South and 130 degrees East to 120 degrees West. The sanctuary declared in French Polynesia is the largest in the region and covers an area the size of Europe.

**Turtles**—Six of the world's seven species of marine turtles are found in the Pacific and five of these are designated as endangered. Turtles are important in the Pacific Islands as a cultural icon and an important food source. For people living in outer islands, turtle meat and eggs are a fresh source of protein. Turtles are also killed for their shells to make jewelry.

Turtles migrate great distances, often over thousands of kilometers. Turtles with tags that indicate nesting sites in Scilly Atoll in French Polynesia, have been identified feeding in Fiji, New Caledonia, Tonga, Wallis Island, Vanuatu, and the Cook Islands. Most turtles return to nest between two to eight years after their last breeding season. The slow growth and development of turtles makes them particularly susceptible to exploitation. In addition, the fact that turtles must return to a specific nesting beach makes them vulnerable when development removes these critical nesting beaches. Turtles also die through entanglement in commercial purse seine and longline fishing nets.

**Other species**—Other regional species that are vulnerable at the present time include Hector's dolphins in New Zealand. World Wide Fund for Nature has given Hector's dolphin the moniker of "world's rarest marine dolphin." The Conservation Society of Pohnpei and others are working to highlight the problem of shark finning. This practice kills the whole animal so that the fin can be sold to Asian markets for food and medicinal items. As an animal on the top of the food chain, sharks play an important ecological role. It is difficult for populations to recover because sharks grow slowly and have delayed sexual maturity.

**Introduced Species**—The spread of non-native species over the last century is unprecedented. These species arrive to their new home through aquaculture operations or in the ballast water of ships. Once established, they often have no natural predators and as a result dominate and in some cases destroy the natural habitat. Controlling or eradicating introduced marine species after they have successfully colonized is, in most cases, considered impossible and can cost millions of dollars.