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Sustainable whale and dolphin watching tourism has positive economic impacts:IORA

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Participants at the workshop

The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) Whale and Dolphin Watching Workshop was held in Colombo recently under the theme 'Building Sustainable Whale and Dolphin Watching Tourism in the Indian Ocean Region'.

The workshop was supported by the Australian Departments of Environment and Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Sri Lankan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in partnership with the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS), IORA Secretariat, International Whaling Commission (IWC) and Murdoch University's Cetacean Research Unit.

The objectives of the workshop were to promote regional cooperation between IORA Member States; build relationships between public sector organizations in IORA Member States to build capacity to undertake government-related functions to achieve sustainable whale and dolphin watching tourism; support the development of a regional best practice approach to sustainable whale and dolphin watching;

improve understanding among IORA Member States of whale and dolphin watching tourism as an important Blue Economy sector; and promote women's leadership and economic empowerment in whale and dolphin watching tourism in the region.

Speaking at the event, IPS Executive Director, Dr. Saman Kelegama said "Achieving sustainable outcomes cannot be taken for granted and are not automatic", adding that "great care must be exercised in managing whale and dolphin watching tourism, if we are to achieve the desired sustainable outcomes; and that growing opportunities for income must be prudently combined with conservation of biodiversity". He also stressed the importance of IORA countries working together to ensure that growth in the tourism sector is socially, ecologically and economically sustainable in the long term to the benefit of all member states.

Guest of honour Australian High Commissioner - Designate in Sri Lanka, Bryce Hutcheson inaugurating the workshop stressed the importance of blue economy "as a programme for policy priority and key to sustainable growth in the IORA region". Addressing the gathering PiaSimonsen, Deputy Director, IORA Secretariat and Bruno Mainini, Chairman of IWCalso stressed the importance of promoting whale and dolphin watching tourism.

Minister of Sustainable Development and Wildlife, Gamini Jayawickrama Perera, joining the technical sessions of the workshop welcomed the 17 participating member states by underscoring the importance of sustainability and pointed out that whale and dolphin watching tourism as a way to generate economic, social and ecological benefits. The Minister also reiterated Sri Lanka's commitment to the conservation of marine species and resources.

The workshop emphasized that sustainable whale and dolphin watching tourism can provide valuable direct and indirect positive impact for economic empowerment of women and youth with significant spill over effects into the tourism sector value chain.Participants recognized that the behavioural ecology of whales and dolphins, as long-lived, slow and late reproducers and socially complex species, render them particularly vulnerable to human disturbance and can result in them experiencing detrimental effects from tourism operations, if not carefully managed.

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