

FOREWORD

IT WAS WITH considerable surprise that I received the request to write the Foreword to this impressive volume, but one that I am very honoured to accept. Peter Best was one of the first cetacean biologists I met almost 30 years ago, and one of those who has most influenced my thinking, not only on cetacean conservation and biology, but also on the privilege and burden faced by scientists when dealing with a group of mammals that represent perhaps the world's most charismatic megafauna.

Consciously or subconsciously, by his behaviour in international fora such as the Scientific Committee of the International Whaling Commission, he has shown me that the most productive and honourable role a scientist can play is to be thorough, questioning and objective, rather than taking the more political role of an unquestioning lobbyist. The implications of a conclusion reached using one's 'best' scientific judgement should never influence one's presentation of the results – I sometimes fear that the honesty and integrity of such a view is being lost given the many environmental problems facing the world and the need to 'act'. Peter's behaviour throughout his long and productive career shows that the best, most lasting and most effective conservation action comes from strong, objective science.

From his UK beginnings, Peter has evolved into the leading cetologist of southern Africa, and it is more than fitting that he has written the definitive volume of southern African cetaceans. In a publishing world where knowledge and experience of cetaceans sometimes seem to be the least important criteria for writing a popular book on the subject, it is indeed a delight to see a true expert in the field put so much effort into what, despite the ever-expanding research into all aspects of cetacean biology, is destined to be a classic reference for many years to come. In what clearly is a labour of love, Peter has consulted in his own inimitable, sometimes grumpy but always fair way, all of the available literature and distilled this into a concise, accurate and occasionally provocative account of the wide range of cetacean species in this fascinating area of the world's oceans.

The number of references cited is indeed a testament both to his thoroughness and to his belief that the reader should be

able to trace the source of any statements made, and if necessary question the conclusions reached. The species accounts are simply excellent, from their considerations of taxonomy and general biology through to their discussion of conservation status. The volume also contains many gems of Peter's own original work and careful thinking. As just one of many new ideas, rare in such encyclopaedic tomes, I would cite his possible link of strandings of beaked whales to whalers' use of ASDIC (a form of sonar) – a good example of taking modern findings and extending them to past situations.

In a diplomatic written style not always present in his blunt verbal (sometimes audible only to blue whales) interventions, I was impressed by his rather gentle 'questioning of the wisdom of attempting a global assessment' of any species – when he and many others have spent their careers emphasising the importance of population level rather than species level assessments. Despite the authoritative, scholarly style of the volume, there are intriguing and occasional glimpses of Peter's dry humour; however, even as a not-so-good Irish Catholic, I hesitate to draw attention to Peter's questioning of the local Cape Town community with respect to the restorative powers of ambergris for problems of erectile dysfunction!

It would be quite remiss of me to complete this Foreword without reference to the outstanding illustrations and photographs to be found in this volume. The illustrations of the species can only be described as excellent – in choosing Pieter Folkens, Peter Best clearly chose the best. The photographs too, whether of skeletal material, archive material or of animals in the field, have been carefully and expertly chosen.

This volume is without doubt a major contribution to cetacean literature – we should all be grateful.

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