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MINISTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT, HERITAGE AND THE ARTS

SPEECH AT THE LAUNCH OF THE ANTARCTIC WHALE RESEARCH EXPEDITION

QUEEN'S WHARF, WELLINGTON, NZ

29 JANUARY 2010

Thank you John for the introduction.

Let me begin by acknowledging

- The Honourable Dr Wayne Mapp, Minister for Research, Science and Technology and Minister for Defence;
- The Honourable Dr Nick Smith, Minister for the Environment, Climate Change Issues and the Accident Compensation Corporation;
- Mr Chris Mace, Chair of the Board of Directors of the National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research;
- The captain and crew of the *Tangaroa*; and the New Zealand, French and Australian researchers about to commence this important voyage.

Seven months ago the New Zealand Foreign Minister, Murray McCully along with Australia's Foreign Minister, Stephen Smith, and I, jointly announced the first Antarctic whale research expedition as part of the Southern Ocean Research Partnership.

And it gives me great pleasure to be standing here today at Queen's Wharf to help launch this voyage.

This marks a truly exciting and pivotal moment in the history of research into these amazing creatures.

But it also comes against a background that is sadly familiar.

It is profoundly disappointing that in the year 2010, as we strive cooperatively to understand more than ever before about our precious marine environment, we still witness the annual killing of whales in the Southern Ocean behind the facade of scientific research.

The debate over whaling is well-rehearsed, and public awareness and support for bringing an end to this practice is strong.

The fact is that for much too long, the International Whaling Commission has been gridlocked by entrenched divisions and ritualised arguments, while the actual numbers of whales killed has increased, including a doubling of the number of whales targeted in the Southern Ocean.

Again we have seen this summer immense public concern over the whaling activities taking place in the Southern Ocean.

It is an annual event that the Australian Government has said clearly and consistently that we resolutely oppose.

It is why we have embarked on an unprecedented diplomatic effort on the issue.

It is why we are engaged in talks right now, through the International Whaling Commission, advocating the reform of the Commission into a modern, conservation-focused organisation.

We will continue to be engaged in these important discussions ahead of the next IWC meeting in June, but we want to see real progress on the critical issues facing the Commission which have grid-locked it for years, none more so than the unilateral killing of whales in the name of scientific research.

But we have also recognised that the whaling debate needs a circuit breaker, that we need to demonstrate actively and collaboratively that real science can take place without grenade tipped harpoons.

We need to turn around the question, 'why should countries stop whaling?' to ask, 'what do we need to know about whales, and how can we best discover it?'

We need to recognise that we have reached the point in time, an age of increasingly sophisticated scientific endeavour, where we have the capacity to learn everything we need to know about whales without killing them.

To recognise that whale research should be guided by clear priorities, filling gaps in our knowledge, and like all best-practice science, grounded in an approach that is ethical and concerned with animal welfare.

That is why in December 2008 I announced a \$32 million six year program for national and international non-lethal cetacean research and conservation initiatives.

A program of this scale has not been seen before. It marries rigorous science and serious environmental inquiry, with an emphasis on collaboration, and respect for the oceans and the creatures that make their home in the vast waters of our planet.

The investment includes over \$14 million to kick start the Southern Ocean Research Partnership – an initiative bringing together countries to undertake non-lethal cetacean research in the Southern Ocean.

In March last year, 13 countries, including New Zealand, participated in a planning workshop for the Partnership in Sydney and developed a five-year plan which was subsequently endorsed as part of the scientific work program of the International Whaling Commission (the IWC).

Besides Australia and New Zealand, other countries who so far have committed to participating in the Partnership are Argentina, Chile, Brazil, South Africa, France and the United States. I encourage other countries, including Japan, to consider participating in this important initiative.

The Southern Ocean Research Partnership is the first truly international, multidisciplinary research collaboration with a focus on improving the conservation of whales through non-lethal science. It is the largest program of its kind in the world.

And today we are witnessing the launch of the first major research voyage of the Partnership.

This expedition, supported by the Australian Government, in cooperation with New Zealand will, over the next six weeks, conduct non-lethal whale research of the highest priority in the Ross Sea area and the adjacent Southern Ocean.

The research undertaken on the expedition will help improve our understanding of the population structure, abundance, trends, distribution and ecological role of whales in the Southern Ocean.

Results will directly inform the actions we take to improve the conservation of whales and the proper functioning of a healthy Southern Ocean ecosystem.

Scientists on board the *Tangaroa* will use state of the art non-lethal research techniques such as biopsy sampling, satellite tracking and acoustic and hydrographic surveys.

Two key science priorities for the expedition are:

- to understand the feeding behaviour of whales, including interactions with pack-ice, krill and their environment; and
- to investigate patterns of whale population mixing on their feeding grounds, and linkages to their northern breeding grounds.

The research will focus on humpback whales, Antarctic minke and blue whales.

Australia and New Zealand have assembled scientists who are international leaders in their fields to conduct this work. Dr Nick Gales will lead the

scientific aspects of the work with his colleagues from Australia, New Zealand and France. It is an impressive example of multinational co-operation.

Their research projects have been deliberately developed to address the most pressing conservation science issues for whales in this region.

Their work will inform our understanding of why some species, such as Antarctic blue whales remain such a rare animal in the Southern Ocean.

It will also address key issues associated with climate change, such as how whales utilise their vulnerable sea-ice habitats.

Preliminary results of the expedition will be presented at the IWC annual meeting in Morocco in June.

Feedback and guidance from the IWC's Scientific Committee will then shape the research projects and priorities in future years that will also involve work from South American and European countries, the US, South Africa, as well as Australia and New Zealand.

I am confident the Partnership will help forge a template for best-practice research in the Commission, strengthening collaboration between countries and contributing lasting benefits for whale conservation around the world.

We are at a point in the history of whale conservation when this collaboration is critical, as the countries of the IWC have the opportunity to move beyond the divisions of the past and the practices of a bygone era, and work together in a cooperative spirit.

On behalf of the Australian Government I wish the researchers a safe and productive voyage and I look forward to the expedition's findings.

Thank you.