



The 20th Biennial Conference on the Biology of Marine Mammals

Over 1200 delegates converged on Dunedin in December 2013 to learn about marine mammal biology and conservation.

Delegates:

1200 delegates from more than 30 countries

Destination:

Dunedin, New Zealand

Duration

9-13 December, 2013

Venues:

The University of Otago,
Dunedin Centre, Town Hall
and The Regent Theatre

New Zealand has a rich and diverse population of marine mammals. Almost half the world's whales, porpoises and dolphins have been reported in New Zealand waters. These include Hector's dolphins, not found anywhere else, rare beaked whales, New Zealand sea lions which are only found in southern waters and New Zealand fur seals.

Combined with the strength of marine mammal research at the University of Otago, this made New Zealand the prime location for The 20th Biennial Conference on the Biology of Marine Mammals. With 1200 delegates and 24 exhibitors from more than 30 countries, the conference in December 2013 was the largest in Dunedin for a decade.

Hosted by Otago University and featuring 29 of its scientists who presented research, the conference focused on the conservation of marine mammals by using science to make a difference. Topics ranged from sperm whale vocalisations in Tonga, to the presence of tusks in prehistoric New Zealand dolphins. It was jointly held at the university and the historic Regent Theatre with some keynote speeches presented at the Dunedin Town Hall, which features eight room options and a maximum capacity of 2300. The conference was organised by internationally recognised scientists Professor Liz Slooten and Professor Stephen Dawson of the university and both directors of the New Zealand Whale and Dolphin Trust, as well as US professional conference organiser Kim Rhodes from Experient.

New Zealand won the bid for the event six years earlier at the 2007 conference in Cape Town, South Africa, beating out a rival bid from Australia with the help of Tourism New Zealand's conference assistance programme (CAP) fund. It was originally intended for Christchurch but was moved after the earthquakes.

With 90 per cent of delegates from overseas, there was plenty of incentive to show off New Zealand's diverse marine mammals while many of the visitors spent up to an extra two weeks in and around Dunedin. The extended stays included tours of Dunedin's beaches and the Otago Peninsula to see the New Zealand sea lion as well as trips further afield to the likes of Akaroa, near Christchurch, for sightings of Hector's dolphin. Other popular destinations included Fiordland, home to the bottlenose and dusky dolphins, and Kaikoura in the north for whale watching.

In keeping with the conference theme, the International Fund for Animal Welfare provided an award for the talk which contributed most to conservation and animal welfare. The US\$ 10,000 award must be spent in furthering research on animal welfare and conservation of marine mammals. Meanwhile The Society for Marine Mammalogy and the local organising committee raised close to \$90,000 for student travel grants allowing 132 students to attend the conference.

The conference was touted as a "great success" according to Society president Helene Marsh "despite the unprecedented impact of multiple key threatening processes: the Global Financial Crisis, the Christchurch earthquakes, the US government shutdown and the propeller falling off the ferry bringing the recycled paper for the programme booklets from the North Island". She said the group "learned a great deal in Dunedin" about the conservation challenges to marine mammals.

For information on hosting an international conference in Dunedin contact:

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