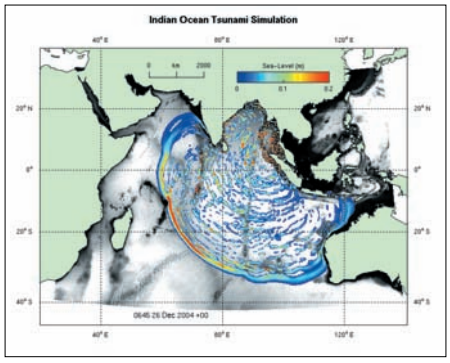
Australia's marine assessment team assisting the Maldives

CSIRO, the Australian Institute of Marine Science (AIMS) and the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) are coordinating a marine and fisheries taskforce, currently stationed on the Maldives, to assess the effects of the recent tsunami on marine ecosystems.

When offered Australia's assistance by Prime Minister John Howard at the recent leaders' crisis summit in Bangkok, President of the Maldives, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, nominated marine damage assistance as one of the greatest priorities.

The call for assistance has offered a unique opportunity for scientists from Australia's different marine research organisations to work together on the cause. Deputy Chief of CSIRO Marine Research, Dr John Gunn is heading the response, and is working with the Australian Government's contact, AusAid.

The taskforce includes three AIMS scientists with coral reef and fish expertise, two CSIRO marine/fisheries ecologists, a management expert from GBRMPA, a consultant with extensive AusAid experience in the Maldives, and various field operatives. The researchers are collaborating with local experts to form small assessment teams.



To view the comprehensive Indian Ocean tsunami simulation produced by CSIRO Marine Research go to: www.marine.csiro.au/research/tsunami/tsunami_sim_med.mov CSIRO Marine Research

The areas of specific interest for the taskforce include: coral reef, coral reef fish communities, lagoonal fish (particularly baitfish), ground water contamination, erosion, litter and the use of corals in any rebuilding exercise. The focus is on the rapid assessment of impacts across the whole of the Maldives (not just the tourist centres), to establish what can be done in the short, medium and longer term.

Don Michel, Head of Communications at CSIRO Marine Research said that fortuitously the team would be aided by data from a research visit made to the Maldives last year, which will provide a useful benchmark.

'There may not be severe damage to the reefs' he said. 'Fringing reefs like those around the Maldives have had two million years of exposure to such events and they've adapted to cope. There will probably be more impact on the local fisheries because the surges may have washed baitfish out to sea from the nursery habitat around the islands. Commercial species may have been disrupted and might not come back for a while'. 'Turtles and other pelagic species might also have been affected,' Mr Michel said.

A whale strandings database and network is developing

The spate of whale strandings in Australia and New Zealand in the last six months have spurred efforts to establish a mammals stranding database and a scientific research network to help understanding of why the phenomenon occurs and share key information.

The database and network were priority recommendations arising from the national Marine Mammals Stranding Conference, held in May last year, where more than 70 scientists, veterinarians, museum staff, and industry, government, and non-government representatives from Australia, New Zealand, the USA and the UK discussed the latest knowledge and important next steps.

Since then there have been mass strandings of various species of cetaceans in the region including large pods of pilot whales and bottlenose dolphins on King and Maria islands. Strandings are apparently relatively common along the coasts of Tasmania and Bass Strait in the warmer months, but researchers are still unclear about what causes them.

The Conference concluded that while the states and territories have local procedures in place, a national set of protocols for the collection and archiving of strandings information, a national information database, and an Australian Marine Mammals Strandings Network should be established.

After declaring in late November last year that it would fund the development of a whale strandings database, the federal government has reconfirmed its commitment to helping research, saying that a broad marine mammals database and the marine mammals network were now being developed.

After being invited to cooperate on research and information exchange with Australia, the New Zealand Government has agreed to contribute its country's best available expertise and research to the cause.

The network is expected to achieve a cooperative approach to strandings and research, progress on the understanding of why stranding occur, to encourage the sharing of relevant information, and to reinforce progress through capacity building, training, resource sharing and collaborative projects.

Whales' cohesive social structure appears central to mass strandings. istockphoto