

NGO claims oil and gas leases to impact whale populations

The International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) claims that the use of seismic airguns in association with proposed oil and gas leases in the Bonney Upwelling area off the coast of South Australia will impact on endangered blue whale habitat and calving grounds for endangered southern right whales.



Credit: NOAA/Marine Photobank

IFAW has called for critically important areas in the region to be ‘completely off limits to the oil and gas industry’.

According to IFAW campaigner, Matthew Collis, the bidding process used by the Federal Department of Resources to grant leases for petroleum exploration ‘is not open to public scrutiny and is allowing the relentless expansion of industry over important whale habitat all around Australia’.

‘Some areas are simply too important to be handed out for exploitation without any public discussion or community involvement,’ he says. ‘The government is failing to balance the needs of the whales with the needs of the oil companies.’

‘It’s no good saying people can have their say once these areas have been handed over to oil companies.’

‘There needs to be a debate about whether these areas are handed out at all. The [Federal] Environment Department needs to be involved at a much earlier stage and be an advocate for whale protection.’

IFAW is concerned about a lease covering a large section off the Bonney Coast of South Australia due to be decided in May.

‘The Bonney Upwelling is recognised by the Australian government as one of only three known blue whale feeding habitats in our waters,’ says Mr Collis.

‘The government itself states the blue whales that inhabit the Bonney Upwelling feeding grounds “should be regarded

as key groups that should be carefully protected”.’

He adds that, in 2010, another of the three recognised feeding grounds - the Duntroon Basin, off the Eyre Peninsula, SA - was released, and is pending exploration by Bight Petroleum.

‘At the July 2011 International Whaling Commission (IWC) meeting, Environment Minister, Tony Burke, launched the Blue Whale research project, providing a non-lethal alternative to Japan’s “scientific” whaling in Antarctica.

‘[But], at the same time that the [Federal] Environment Department is investing effort and resources in protecting blue whales in the Southern Ocean, the Department of Resources wants to expose blue whales in Australian waters to deafening seismic surveys.’

IFAW’s concern stems from the fact that whale and dolphin species use their acoustic sense to navigate, locate prey and predators, attract mates, and maintain group cohesion and social interactions. Cetaceans are also sensitive to human-generated underwater noise including that generated by oil and gas exploration such as seismic surveys, underwater construction and increased shipping noise.

Source: IFAW

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