



CHILE: Proposing a Haven for Blue Whales

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By Jennifer Jacquet, AquaNews Correspondent



Posters and photographs of marine mammals plaster the walls of an otherwise dull office at the Austral University in south-central Chile. An inflatable orca hangs from the ceiling, hovering over Rodrigo Hucke-Gaete as he points out the boundary of a proposed marine reserve on a nautical chart of Chile's Corcovado Gulf. The reserve is designed to protect the world's largest creatures and Hucke-Gaete's specialty: blue whales.



Rodrigo Hucke-Gaete surveys the waters of the Corcovado Gulf (top), pausing to snap photos of a blue whale for identification purposes (bottom).

Photo: Rodrigo Hucke-Gaete

Despite his academic surroundings, Dr. Rodrigo Hucke-Gaete is really a modern-day explorer: he is the principal scientist investigating a newly discovered blue whale feeding ground and nursery in southern Chile. The area was discovered in 1997, following a blue whale study cruise along the coast of Chile by the International Whaling Commission (IWC). Hucke-Gaete was part of that expedition and remarked on his reaction to the whales: "After I saw my first blue whale I thought, okay, now I can die."

Hucke-Gaete has been studying blue whales ever since. He found that blue whales consistently occupied certain areas of the Corcovado Gulf, particularly those closer to shore. He and others eventually discerned that Corcovado is a nursing and feeding ground that harbors many blue whales, including mother-calf pairs, during the austral (southern-hemisphere) summer.

Looking to the Sea

The Corcovado Gulf is located roughly two-thirds down the slender country of Chile, which stretches from the middle of South America's west coast to the southern tip of the continent. Although 19% of Chilean land is protected, the nation has largely ignored its ocean—Chile has only one national marine reserve along 4,000 miles of rugged coastline. "In Chile, we were born looking

at the mountains and not at the sea," Huckle-Gaete explains.

Huckle-Gaete is part of an effort to compensate for this terrestrial favoritism. To protect the blue whale, he and other scientists have proposed that an extensive marine reserve be established. Although Huckle-Gaete admits it's unlikely that the national government will commit to the entire area, he hopes that some part of the proposed area will be protected. Earlier this year, the Chilean government announced its intention to fund a three-year study to determine the best management scenario for the Corcovado area.

Blue Whale Center

Once home to the largest blue whale population in the world, the waters of the southern hemisphere now harbor only 400-1,400 individuals. Huckle-Gaete continues to study this population, meager though it may be. After conducting his early research from the ferry and then a boat rented from local fishermen, Huckle-Gaete finally received enough grant money last year to purchase his own boat. He and a team of scientists led by Dr. Bruce Mate at Oregon State University worked from the boat to tag 24 animals (12 blue whales and 12 humpbacks) to learn more about their migration patterns and other behaviour.

The mysteries uncovered by Huckle-Gaete and his team would be for naught without local cooperation and understanding about the ecological importance of blue whales. With this in mind, Huckle-Gaete recently helped establish the Blue Whale Center. Part of the Blue Whale Center's mission is to undertake scientific research, to educate the public—particularly children and fishermen—and, in the near future, to establish a scientific station with an interpretation center for the community of Melinka, a small village perched on blue whale waters. The Blue Whale Center, with help from other institutions, will also encourage the community to participate in sustainable development programs such as regulated whale watching and other forms of eco-tourism.

In his award-winning 1971 book *The Blue Whale*, George Small wrote: "Isn't there a single positive factor that can counter-balance to some small degree those now tipping the scales so heavily against the blue whale in its struggle for survival? Yes, there is one: the will to live." Certainly, he would add to this scale the dedicated efforts of Rodrigo Huckle-Gaete, the Blue Whale Center, and with luck, a new marine reserve in the Corcovado Gulf.



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Her work focuses on open-access resources, particularly the dilemmas facing the marine environment.

The Legacy of Whaling

Blue whales received international protection in the mid-1960s, after whaling had reduced their populations to less than 3% of historical numbers. International trade in blue whales is forbidden under Appendix I of the [Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora](#) (CITES)—the strictest level of protection offered under this international treaty. Blue whales are also listed as Endangered on the World Conservation Union (IUCN) [Red List of Endangered Species](#).

Source: Vancouver Aquarium Marine Science Centre