

**A Message from Her Royal Highness Princess Pilolevu,
Royal Patron of Whales, Tonga
May 2010**



Honourable Prime Minister , Distinguished delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen

Malo lei lei,

I send you warm greetings from the Pacific Islands, an ocean away from your meeting today on whales and their future, but perhaps not so far away in terms of aspirations we may share for the future of our oceans and certain species, such as whales, found therein.

I am pleased at this opportunity to speak to you about whales and the Pacific and only sorry that I cannot be there in person. I extend a warm invitation to each and every one of you to visit the Pacific, and in particular, I hope your journeys might one day bring you to the shores of Tonga.

Last month, I hosted the Ocean Voices meeting, in Auckland New Zealand --in part this event was hosted to tell the story of the humpback whale in our region, all that we have lost, learned and aspire to, for the future of this species. It was ALSO to highlight the DIRE NEED to

conserve these whales and our CONCERN that there are proposals to hunt such species in the Southern Ocean Whale Sanctuary, waters which are just south of our own. I understand that your meeting this week has similar objectives for whale conservation management, and in wishing you well for this week's meeting, I would like to share Tonga's experience with you.

In Tonga, the story and lessons we have learnt from the humpback whale take us from being a whaling, to a whale watching nation. I am very proud of what Tonga has achieved for whale conservation since my father, King TAUF A HAU TOO POO the fourth, banned whaling in Tonga more than 30 years ago. This action, combined with the global moratorium on commercial whaling, laid the foundation for whales to begin to recover in our waters and laid a foundation today, for a centrepiece of Tonga's tourism – whale watching.

I have inherited my responsibility for whales from my late father. I am Tonga's Royal Patron for Whales and grateful for the opportunity to tell Tonga's story of lessons learnt from these wonderful animals.

Like my fellow Pacific Islanders, our ancestors came to an ocean that was once rich with all forms of marine life, including the great whales. These magnificent creatures feature in many Pacific oral traditions. For example: In *Tonga the whale hears the worms cry and is a good omen for a productive yam season.....* we know that when we hear the whales cry and see them in our waters it is a good omen for Tongans and the health of our ocean home.

Indeed Polynesian travels throughout the region are often linked with stories of migratory species such as great whales and turtles. We realized the migratory paths of many species and used these as guides to the seas of the South Pacific. In New Caledonia and Vanuatu the seasonal arrival of humpback whales was also a cue for yam planting, a central vegetable of our diet. In Samoa, Paitele - the great tofola was responsible for creating the Fusi Peninsula in Safata,, and his head - which has turned to stone - still rests there today. In New Zealand, Maori strongly identify with whales as guides to their people during canoe voyages.

In essence, whales, like Pacific Island people, are ocean voyagers and their tremendous migrations reflect many of our own journeys and ocean

crossings. Whales are indeed part of our rich Pacific heritage. Whales are indeed part of us.

Yet today, it is fair to describe great whales, including the humpbacks, as a mere remnant of what we once shared our ocean with.

The story of what has happened in a few hundred years and the devastation wrought by whaling, the impacts of which we are still living with today and will be inherited by our children and generations to come, is a story that must be told, not just for whales, but for ocean survival, and indeed our survival.

It is a story of what we lost, of human greed for the ocean, and is a shining of light of what we can regain and share for the future. Tongans and the people of the Pacific have shared the ocean with humpback whales for many thousands of years. If a whale stranded-- it was a gift from the ocean, and was not wasted. Life in small islands can be a precarious existence,, with limited resources. In Tonga, we did not hunt humpback whales until the Yankee Whalers came, and brought with them technology - like harpoons – from this time we began a tradition of hunting whales. By world standards, this hunt was small and focused on food for our people.

Yet this hunt DID contribute to the downfall of this creature in Tonga and in the Pacific region. What we know today is that although the International Whaling Commission protected humpback whales from commercial whaling in the early 1960s... illegal whaling of this species continued well in to the 1970s and beyond., in the oceans south of New Zealand and Australia, causing Oceania humpback whales to be brought to the brink of extinction. Tens of thousands of Pacific –born humpback whales were taken illegally in this time – estimates give more than 45,000 from Soviet Union catches alone.

In 1978, when Tonga banned whaling in our waters,, whale researchers estimated that the number of female humpback whales coming to Tonga each year to breed was only around 15 animals – the population around 60-70 mature animals – meaning the breeding population of humpback whales in Tonga was practically extinct.

We Tongans had played a part in the demise of this species. We had been whaling for about 80 years at that time. In 1982 the world followed the

example set by Tonga and many other countries and placed a moratorium on commercial whaling.

Today, 32 years later, I am proud to stand before you and know that Tonga has played a leading role in whale conservation and largely because of this we now have a thriving whale watching tourism industry.

Tourists are now coming to our islands for the prime attraction of being able to see these magnificent creatures in their natural habitat. This form of tourism is growing and providing direct employment and business opportunities for our people and also leverages additional benefits for our economy, in the goods and services paid for by visitors, of which we have over 10,000 each year. This industry can continue grow as the whale populations grow and recover their former abundance.

For Tonga, changing from a whale hunting, to whale watching nation, meant marked changes in how we view this marine species, and realising our responsibility to protect them. When we banned whaling, we did not know that we would benefit at all in terms of tourism income. What motivated my father to ban whaling was responsible stewardship of Tongan resources and this included the whales.

Tourism income from whale watching is a fortuitous and important outcome for Tonga. However, with these opportunities from whale watching tourism comes responsibilities. Tonga takes seriously whale conservation, both as a national and international responsibility.

Many Pacific Island states and people share these views. In fact there are now 11 EEZ based whale sanctuaries, totalling more than 18 million sq km in our ocean.

In summary, Tongan waters have always supported a wide range of whale and dolphins species, we have lost much due to whaling over the two centuries and we desire for these species to recover. We have strong laws in place for their protection and know that a good part of our tourism development relies on being good stewards of these and our wider marine and island environments. I believe that these creatures are a flagship for Tonga's marine environment and represent through their long migrations the need for Tonga to cooperate with neighbouring nations and more widely with the international community for this species effective conservation and regeneration.

Ladies and gentlemen – our Tongan story of the humpback whale has many lessons and takes us from the past,, to today,, and forward into the future. We ALL share our ocean with TOFUA, the great whales, and we share this responsibility for their care with all of you.

I wish you the greatest success with your meeting this week and I look forward to hearing the results.

Thank you.