



written by Dr Simon Berrow

Whale and Dolphin Sanctuary

On 7th June 1991 Taoiseach Charles Haughey declared Ireland a "whale and dolphin sanctuary". This followed a proposal from the newly formed Irish Whale and Dolphin Group who suggested this status was appropriate given the importance of Irish waters for whales and dolphins.

The proposal was raised at a meeting of around 20-30 people who met at the newly opened ENFO office in Dublin. At the meeting the IWDG was formed and the sanctuary proposal was the group's first action. As a new group it was deemed important the proposal was supported by established organisations and the IWDG wrote to groups such as Skerries Marine Watch, the Irish Wildlife Trust and Greenpeace to ask for their support. After around 12 letters of support were received, the proposal was released at the IWDG first official meeting in March 1991 and it was only 97 days later that the historic sanctuary declaration was made. Prior to the declaration, a few people representing the IWDG including Don Conroy, Dick Warner and Johnny Woodlock visited the Taoiseach where the proposal was discussed. After agreeing that the Taoiseach would declare Ireland a sanctuary, he turned to Don Conroy and asked him when his birthday was. "It is the 7th June Taoiseach" replied Don, "so that is when we will declare Ireland a whale and dolphin sanctuary" replied the Taoiseach, and so it was.



The declaration was the first of its kind in Europe and at first was treated with cynicism and scepticism as an empty political gesture, with no actual benefits to whales and dolphins. However, as more people realised the importance of Ireland for whales and dolphins and the concept of a sanctuary grew, more people within, and outside Ireland, celebrated the gesture. Ultimately this led to Ireland supporting the Southern Ocean Sanctuary, hosting the International Whaling Commission which led to the Irish Commissioner becoming the Chair of the IWC and leading to a compromise proposal for the continuation of commercial whaling; known as the "Irish Proposal" - but that is another story.

One of the important aspects of the sanctuary declaration apart from raising public awareness of the richness of Irish waters for marine life was its acknowledgement

that not only whales and dolphins but their habitat should be protected and out as far as the EEZ - up to 200 nautical miles offshore. The sanctuary declaration preceded the Habitats and other important European Directives and thus was undoubtedly a pioneering statement in its day.

In 2011, The Haughey family donated Haughey's yacht, the Celtic Mist, to the Irish Whale and Dolphin Group as a research vessel.