

## **NZMSS First Overseas Conference Travel Fund Report**

Maria Jesus Valdes Hernandez

PhD candidate, Marine Science, University of Otago

*INCISE – World Marine Mammal Conference, 9 – 12<sup>th</sup> December, Barcelona, Spain.*

I wanted to work with marine mammals since I was three years old. I started doing internships learning about these animals very early on and chose a career path that would allow me to study them. During my undergraduate studies, I heard about the World Marine Mammal Conference for the first time and since then I always dreamed about presenting my work there, surrounded by all the world's experts in the field which I grew up looking up to. I would like to thank the New Zealand Marine Sciences Society for supporting my travel to attend my first overseas conference. It was an extremely valuable experience and it allowed me to present my PhD research titled "effects of mussel farming on Hector's dolphins: an ecosystem perspective" to international experts. It was a huge milestone in my career presenting in English at the biggest marine mammal conference. I received great feedback and confirmed that my research topic is novel and there is great interest in its outcomes. As mussel farming does not involve the addition of food into the system, its effects on marine ecosystems have been considered low-moderate and often overlooked. Little is known about the effects of this industry on marine mammals and there is a lot of interest on this topic to ensure the sustainability of this fast growing industry.

It was a big conference that gathered 2731 attendees with 1636 presentations (203 oral talks, 412 speed talks and 1021 posters). Despite of its size, which made it somehow challenging to network, I was able to find a few scientists I wanted to meet in person to talk about my project, methods and analysis. This was incredibly valuable for me as it gave me new perspectives and ideas for future research. Additionally, I was lucky to attend a workshop titled "Win More Battles for Marine Mammals!!! Science Communication for REAL Impact". It was led by Dr. Jennifer Lewis (George Mason University / Que Sera Sera Films / Tropical Dolphin Research Foundation) who provided amazing information on how to improve your science communications skills to contribute to animal conservation. I am personally very passionate about this topic, so I found the workshop incredibly useful. Dr. Lewis sent all the people who attended the workshop a list of useful literature which I have devoured and we exchanged contact information as she will be visiting Dunedin later this year.

This conference was a dream come true and I am so grateful for the support that the NZMSS gave me which made it possible for me to attend. MUCHAS GRACIAS!