

Save Whales → Not Whaling

Whaling and the International Whaling Commission

The International Whaling Commission, once referred to as a “whalers’ club,” has slowly evolved toward the idea of not hunting whales commercially. Even so, we may soon see a return to the whalers’ club if commercial whaling is allowed to resume. Whales are once again in peril.

Old-style whaling, conducted from the twelfth century through 1868, was a means of subsistence for various cultures. The hunts were conducted using small boats and hand-thrown weapons. Whale meat was eaten for its nutritional value; whales also were harvested for oil, bone, and baleen for lighting, heating oil, corsets, umbrellas, and a variety of other uses.

By 1926, however, whaling was done by huge fleets of boats carrying explosive harpoons, and whales were killed by the tens of thousands. This modern whaling led to the widespread annihilation of vast stocks of great whales throughout the world’s oceans. Whaling businesses were so successful that by the 1950s and 1960s, many were driven to bankruptcy because there were so few whales left.

THE BIRTH OF THE IWC

Recognizing that whale stocks had been reduced by overzealous killing, whaling nations decided to band together and sign the International Convention on the Regulation of Whaling (ICRW), which created the International Whaling Commission (IWC) in 1946. Initially, the IWC oversaw the continuing destruction of whale stocks. Although kill quotas were set and trade was supposedly controlled, for 40 years whalers routinely exceeded their allowed take. The IWC had neither the political will nor the legal authority to override excessively high quotas or to correct inaccurate reporting of the numbers of whales killed.

By the early 1960s, blue whale populations had been so devastated that the 1962–1963 reported kill, which was 1,000 whales, constituted about 60 percent of the estimated Antarctic population. Armed with this knowledge, the scientific advisors at the 1963 IWC meeting recommended an immediate, drastic reduction in the killing of all whales in the Antarctic. The advisors warned that the blue whale might already have been hunted beyond the point of recovery and that any level of continued killing would significantly increase the risk of extinction. Japan refused to accept their report and demanded that certain areas remain open to hunting. In the 1964–1965 season, it took Japan’s 15 floating-factory expeditions operating with 172 catcher-boats to kill a mere 20 of the remaining blue whales. In 1965 the blue whale received complete protection throughout the Antarctic. The killing stopped, but only because the animal was commercially extinct.

Once the blue whale was placed off limits, whaling nations more aggressively hunted the smaller whales, such as fin, sei, and sperm whales. By the 1970s, Japan and the then-U.S.S.R., two remaining high-seas whaling nations, turned to the minke whale, a species seldom hunted due to its relatively small size (approximately 35 feet long). They needed to kill thousands upon thousands of these small whales to make up for the loss of their larger cousins.

A MORATORIUM ON COMMERCIAL WHALING

Speaking about the blue whale, former U.S. Secretary of the Interior Stewart L. Udall said of the 1970s, “This decade may go down in history as marking the end of life for the largest animal ever to inhabit this earth. If so, it will be another morbid monument to man’s shortsighted exploitation of the world’s wildlife bounty.”

In 1972 the United Nations (UN) held its first conference on the environment in Stockholm, Sweden. This meeting marked the opening salvo of whale protection advocates against the IWC. While individuals lobbied delegates inside and environmental and animal protection groups held rallies outside, the UN delegates unanimously adopted a resolution recommending a 10-year moratorium on commercial whaling. Nevertheless, a few weeks later at the IWC meeting in London, whalers soundly defeated the call for a moratorium. ➡

From 1972 to 1982, mighty battles were waged; many whale protection groups, including The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), participated in that decade-long fight. Each year the IWC defeated the moratorium but, due to our pressure, set the quotas lower and lower.

The big showdown between nonwhaling and whaling countries occurred in 1982. An indefinite moratorium finally had the three-fourths majority needed to pass. The compromises made to achieve the moratorium, however, included delaying implementation until 1986 and promising to review the effects of the moratorium on whale stocks beginning in 1990. The moratorium remains in place now only because the pro-whaling nations of Japan and Norway cannot garner the three-fourths majority of votes necessary to overturn it.

EXCEPTIONS TO THE MORATORIUM

Determined to continue whaling, several countries found loopholes in the moratorium. Under the rules of the IWC, certain countries or groups of people can still kill whales under certain conditions. Norway, Japan, Peru, and the U.S.S.R. exercised their sovereign right under this treaty to file official objections, effectively stating that they would not abide by the moratorium. Peru later withdrew its objection. Japan, fearing U.S. retaliation with fish embargoes, withdrew its objection only after nongovernmental organizations filed a lawsuit in 1988. In truth, total compliance with the moratorium didn't take place until 1989.

Japan, Iceland, and South Korea found a way to continue whaling while appearing to obey the moratorium—they used the treaty's scientific research loophole. Japan then sold whale meat domestically, while Iceland and South Korea were able to exploit the market for whale meat in Japan.

Nearly every year, the IWC adopts resolutions attacking the scientific whaling programs as inadequate and useless. Iceland stopped its scientific whaling and eventually withdrew from the IWC, saying the organization had become too protectionist. In 2002 Iceland illegally rejoined the IWC with an objection to the moratorium and resumed scientific whaling the following year. In 2006 it began commercial whaling of minke and fin whales. South Korea has ceased scientific whaling. Japan has not only continued its "research" program but has expanded it. In 2000 the country added sperm whales and Bryde's whales to the hundreds of minke whales it kills each year. It added sei whales in 2001 and fin whales in 2005 and then announced plans to begin hunting humpback whales off Antarctica in December 2007.

Norway, following through on its original objection, resumed commercial whaling in 1993. Japan also wants to resume commercial whaling, but because it has withdrawn its objection to the moratorium, it must either leave the IWC or continue to expand its so-called scientific whaling.

Whether Russia will return to commercial whaling is worrisome. In need of an influx of hard currency, Russia may see commercial whaling as a way to accomplish this.

While some nations look for a return to commercial whaling, whale advocates have redoubled their efforts to establish whale sanctuaries in as many oceans as possible. To date the IWC has created sanctuaries in the Indian Ocean and in the Southern Ocean (Antarctica). Efforts by IWC member nations to create more sanctuaries in the South Pacific and South Atlantic Oceans have been defeated due to pressure from Japan and its allies, which are trying to abolish established sanctuaries. Japan continues to undermine international law by killing whales in protected areas.

THE NEW CENTURY

Since its founding in 1946, the IWC has evolved from an international institution whose primary focus was the apportionment of whaling quotas to one that also recognizes its role in protecting and ensuring the existence of all whales for present and future generations.

However, the IWC may once again become a whalers' club due to pressure from Japan, Iceland, and Norway. It is in the process of drafting a system that would purport to regulate commercial whaling, with the assumption that whalers would harvest only what was sustainable—a feat never before accomplished and unlikely ever to happen.

Clearly, in this new century, the race within the IWC is between whaling forces and those who demand that their governments go to the IWC with the resolve and backbone necessary to end this barbaric practice. As far as most of the world is concerned, it is time for the IWC to become a whale protection organization once and for all.

You can help make sure this happens. Write to President George W. Bush, 1600 Pennsylvania Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20500 and to the Secretary of Commerce, Department of Commerce, 14th St. and Constitution Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20230, and tell them the U.S. government must seek to continue the whaling moratorium and ultimately push for an end to all commercial and scientific whaling.