
1998: IWC50 in Muscat, Oman

by Ben White

The 50th meeting of the International Whaling Commission was held from May 16-21 near Muscat, Oman. Although this country of serene desert peaks and isolated oases may seem like a strange venue, the Arabian Sea that laps its shores is rich in sea life, including many species of whales and dolphins. Commissioners from 35 countries met in plenary session, along with representatives of all persuasions of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and media from around the world. Dozens of resolutions spelling life or death for whales were presented, debated, and voted upon. Surprisingly, many delegates come to the meeting either without firm instructions or with malleable points of view, giving opportunity to those that wish to persuade. As AWI's official observer, my job is to convince delegates that the best course is always one of increased protection.

Overshadowing the meeting was the continued push for the slippery "Irish Proposal," the brainchild of new IWC chair Michael Canny. On the presumption that the IWC is hopelessly deadlocked between nations wanting whales left alone and those wanting to kill them, the proposal offers an ominous compromise: ban Japan's bogus "scientific" whaling in the Antarctic plus all deep water pelagic whaling and the international sale of whale meat, in exchange for opening up whaling in all coastal waters up to 200 miles from land. Mr. Canny was so eager to promote his "compromise" that he specifically asked that no resolutions be introduced that criticized Japan and Norway, the only countries that consistently thumb their noses at IWC rulings.

Despite Mr. Canny's efforts at turning the meeting into a love fest of reconciliation, the plenary quickly split along well-established fault lines. Japan was unwilling to give an inch and immediately caused a ruckus by pushing a vote on instituting the secret ballot. This method of allowing governments to hide their votes has already caused great damage at CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) by facilitating the buying of votes without public repercussions. The Japanese attempt to protect the five Caribbean countries that support their whaling from facing criticism failed badly after vigorous lobbying. The IWC chose to keep their deliberations transparent and open to review.

The Omani meeting saw the return of the United States delegation to their traditional role as whale champions. Under American leadership, a proposal was passed to actually allocate funding for a study of environmental threats facing whales. Combining an analysis of the threats from toxic proliferation, climate change and noise pollution, the study represents a dramatic step forward in changing the IWC from a whaler's club into a conservation body.

The IWC was established in 1946 with the dual mandate of encouraging the "orderly development of whaling" and the conservation of whale "stocks." With whale-watching now far surpassing whale killing in generating income, some argue that the definition of "whaling" includes this benign use, just as birding means bird-watching. Therefore, the IWC could stay true to its mandate, transform itself into a conservation body that actually follows the will of the people of the world, and work to protect whales from all threats, including dumped poisons, loud sounds, habitat destruction and, yes, even harpoons.