
1999: IWC51 in Grenada

Thirty four countries comprising the International Whaling Commission (IWC) met on the tiny Caribbean island of Grenada in late May to vote, debate and grandstand on a wide agenda of resolutions pertaining to whale protection and whale destruction.

Fifty-three years ago at its inception, the IWC had 14 member countries, all active whalers. After the commission allowed the decimation of one species of great whales after another, more and more countries opposed to whaling joined. Some longtime whalers like Australia became the staunchest of whale defenders. This new blood became strong enough to pass a global moratorium on commercial whaling in 1982, to take effect in the 1985-86 season and last indefinitely until a whole new framework is agreed upon.

Meanwhile, whalers have exploited the remaining legal ways to whale: by taking exception to the moratorium (Norway), by calling their whaling scientific research (Japan), and by tucking their whaling under "aboriginal subsistence whaling"--even when no aboriginals are involved, the meat is fed to fur-farm foxes, or sold locally (St. Vincent, Russia and Greenland, respectively.)

Now, the balance has shifted once more. Japan provides economic assistance to seven small island nations (including this year's venue state of Grenada) in exchange for pro-whaling votes within the IWC and CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species). When Japan and Norway are counted, that adds up to a solid pro-whaling core of nine votes. This is enough to deadlock the IWC into virtual parity between the pro- and anti-whaling forces, with many swing votes in between.

Despite an amazing string of insults, threats and bluster from Japan, when the dust settled on the final day of proceedings, the whalers had little to show for their efforts.

Notably:

- The motion to allow secret ballots (so Caribbean countries could hide their Japanese-leveraged votes) was defeated.
- The motion to open up small-scale coastal whaling in Japan was defeated for the twelfth year running.
- No advance was made on a framework to open up commercial whaling. The Irish proposal failed again to make headway, although it retains a faint pulse. This so-called compromise would drop the commercial moratorium on shore-based whaling within a country's economic zone in exchange for banning "scientific whaling," high seas whaling, and the international sale of whalemeat.
- The US environmental threats presentation (see article on pages 10 and 11) and the successful drive to win IWC funding to study the problem, put whalers on the defensive to justify yet another level of assault on beleaguered populations.