
2000: IWC52 in Adelaide, Australia

by Ben White

Despite overwhelming evidence that the world's whales are struggling against a huge array of new threats, the International Whaling Commission (IWC) voted in Adelaide, Australia, July 3-6, to fast track a scheme designed to legitimize commercial whaling. Inexplicably, many formerly pro-whale groups and nations (including the US) assisted this process, offering ways to strengthen the "Revised Management Scheme" (RMS) even though its adoption will lead directly to the abandonment of the fourteen-year-old moratorium on commercial whaling. The resolution, introduced by Sweden and nine other countries, set a timetable for completing the RMS and voting on its structure at next year's full IWC meeting in London. It was passed by consensus.

The push to hasten the renewal of commercial whaling couldn't have come at a worse time. Papers presented at the IWC conference show that whales are threatened by toxic pollution, global warming, the collapse of food sources and the bombardment by intense man-made sounds as never before. Just a sampling of these papers revealed that:

- Emaciated gray whales are washing up along the Pacific Coast of North America by the hundreds (278 in 1999, over 300 so far in 2000). The number of new calves added to the population has shrunk from a high of 1520 in 1997 to 282 last year. Scientists are mystified as to the cause of either event.
- Orca families living off the San Juan Islands of Washington State are dying off. Biopsy assays show some of the highest levels of PCBs ever found in any wildlife.
- Dolphin meat labeled and sold as whale meat in Tokyo has levels of mercury and other heavy metals in concentrations hundreds of times higher than the maximum safe levels for human consumption.
- Sea otter populations in some parts of the Bering Sea are collapsing under pressure from predation from orca whales. This has never been seen before and it is thought to reflect a dramatic shift in food regimes in the North Pacific.
- The US Navy, in cooperation with the National Marine Fisheries Service, is studying the rare mass stranding of four species of whales and dolphins which occurred in the Bahamas immediately after a series of military exercises in March. The studies are concentrating on the effect of sonar on beaked whales. These extremely deep diving whales died not only after the Bahamas exercises but following tests of Low Frequency Active Sonar by NATO forces in Greece in 1996.

The seeds of many of these threats were planted long ago. The chemicals developed during and soon after World War II are just now finding their way into the tissues of marine mammals. Heavy metals and organochlorines bio-accumulate with each step up the food chain. After decades of being eaten by small creatures, then in turn by fish of increasing size, these toxic time bombs are beginning to reach lethal levels of concentration in whales and dolphins.

Given these concerns, the idea of accepting the intentional slaughter of whales is outrageous, but the concept is gaining momentum. The premise behind this scheme is the fantasy that we can take everything we know about whales: abundance, recruitment rate (number of babies added each year), mortality rate, environmental threats, number of whales

being accidentally or deliberately killed; feed all of these numbers into an algorithm, and out will pop a number of whales that can be “harvested” each year without collapsing the populations.

The problems of this approach are myriad. First is the difficulty of counting whales. Whale populations are estimated from ships that cruise on a certain pattern, count all of the whales seen, and extrapolate based on a formula which guesses how many whales are unseen. Primarily, because of the difficulty in seeing and correctly identifying species of these usually hidden ocean creatures, this method has always failed. Highlighting this inherent uncertainty, the Scientific Committee at this year’s IWC meeting found that the long-held number of minke whales in the Southern Oceans is far less than the 760,000 estimated by the Japanese. Even though this number has been used for years to justify the Japanese killing of over four hundred of these whales a year, the Committee found that the actual number may be as low as a third of that estimate.

The second most obvious problem is the fact that whalers have historically lied about the numbers and species of whales they kill. And not just a little. During the sixties and seventies, the Japanese, working with the Russian whalers, underreported their catch of sperm and blue whales by tens of thousands. The presence of observers, highly dependent on the goodwill of the ship’s crew and captain, has never been a barrier to cheating.

Besides the slide back into allowing commercial whaling, the pivotal issue at this year’s meeting, was the proposal by Australia, New Zealand and other Pacific nations to establish a South Pacific Ocean Sanctuary that would ban any killing of whales in a wide area, forever. Major initiatives within the IWC require a 3/4 majority of the 35 member countries. Supposedly, each country has one vote. But the defeat of this popular proposal (with fourteen votes for, eleven against and four abstaining) demonstrated that Japan has finally bought off enough countries to stymie pro-whale initiatives in the IWC. Those voting against the sanctuary included Antigua/Barbuda, Dominica, Grenada, St. Kitts/Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent/Grenadines, and a new Japanese recruit—Guinea. This makes seven poor and small countries that vote with Japan in trade for economic assistance.

One surprise at this meeting was the willingness of some powerful organizations to push for the adoption of the RMS and the subsequent return to commercial whaling. World Wildlife Fund was one of the groups working behind the scenes to legitimize the outlaws and bring whaling “under control.” The damage wrought by splitting the pro-whale camp can be seen in this quote from the July 5 Christian Science Monitor:

“Even some environmental groups have begun quietly saying that they would accept a resumption of commercial whaling under strict conditions. “We’re never going to be promoting it,” says Cassandra Phillips, a whale expert with the British-based World Wildlife Fund, “but we can see a situation where it might be allowable.”

To counter this conciliation by some organizations, and to breathe life back into steadfast opposition to the expansion of whaling, AWI drafted an opening statement that doubled as a sign-on letter. Over two dozen major international organizations endorsed the following text:

Recognizing the massive global support for the complete protection of the world’s whales, the undersigned groups attending the 52nd meeting of the International Whaling Commission (IWC) wish to reaffirm our total opposition to the resumption of commercial whaling.

We therefore support:

- The adoption of the Global Whale Sanctuary as proposed by Australia in 1998, permanently banning all directed takes of whales up to the high-water mark of all seas, with the exception of truly subsistence aboriginal whaling necessary for human survival.
- The urgent international protection of small cetaceans.
- The recognition of whale watching, non-invasive research and educational programs as the optimum utilization of whales.
- The evolution of the IWC into a conservation body that undertakes an audit of all environmental and anthropogenic threats to cetaceans, including: the status of habitat and food sources, a detailed monitoring of the effects of global warming, ozone depletion, and toxic contamination, and a review of the effects of sound pollution in the seas.

We oppose:

- The development or adoption of any regime that lifts the current moratorium on commercial whaling. We specifically reject the concept that it is possible to conservatively and reliably count wild species of whales accurately enough to allow a directed take. Any regime based on such a method is fatally flawed.

A plan allowing the intentional killing of whales assumes a certainty as to how many whales there are, the nature and severity of all threats facing whales, and honesty on the part of the whalers reporting their kills. None of these elements exists. All that is really certain is that the threats are greater than ever before and increasing; and the countries pushing for an acceptance of commercial whaling are the same ones with a long history of falsifying catch records. The greed and managerial incompetence that pushed the great whales to near extinction are still alive and well within the IWC.

The moment cries out for taking stock of the damage we are doing to wild species of whales through toxics, dramatic climate and food regime changes, and the proliferation of loud sounds in the oceans. This is not the time to unleash the harpoons.