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# 2001: IWC53 in London, UK

*by Ben White*

Every year, hundreds of well-educated, well-dressed, and well-paid government officials from about forty countries convene for the International Whaling Commission (IWC) and clash over how much whaling the world will allow. The group voted in 1982 to enact a moratorium on commercial whaling. Subsequently, work has been undertaken to develop a "Revised Management Scheme" (RMS) to regulate future whaling, while the Japanese-led whaling bloc has fought to overturn the ban.

One of its tactics is beginning to bear fruit: the recruiting of poor countries to join the IWC and vote for whaling in exchange for "economic assistance." This year the issue of vote-buying came completely out of the closet. New Zealand Minister of Conservation Sandra Lee and representatives from other South Pacific islands blasted it as illegal and threatened action in the United Nations. Japanese spokesman Misayuki Komatsu defended it as a normal part of international relations.

All eyes in London were on next year's meeting in Shimonoseki, a small whaling village in Japan. The Japanese delegation was overheard vowing to recruit eight more countries to vote its way next year. If accomplished, this would give Japan a clear majority and a good chance of knocking down the moratorium on commercial whaling.

Meanwhile, the whalers' strategy was to tie the meeting into procedural knots and then complain to the media that the organization is hopelessly paralyzed.

After the meeting was opened by the new Chairman, Professor Bo Fernholm of Sweden, the UK Minister of the Environment, Elliot Morley, delivered the opening address, strongly supporting the non-lethal use of whales by whale-watching and vigorously opposing the re-opening of commercial whaling.

The first debate set the tone for the entire conference. Iceland was asking to rejoin the IWC after quitting in 1990, but it wanted to rejoin with a "reservation" to the commercial whaling moratorium agreed upon in 1982. In 1983 the Icelandic Parliament voted 29 to 28 to stop the country's commercial whaling, but the whaling lobby has been working ever since to persuade Iceland to go back to killing whales for profit, and finally it succeeded.

This issue prompted a ferocious battle with Japan and its paid supporters from the Caribbean thundering that the IWC did not have the legal right to stop Iceland from rejoining with a reservation. New Zealand Commissioner Jim McLay countered, arguing that accepting Iceland with its reservation could prove a disastrous precedent in many international treaty organizations. Any country disgruntled with a ruling could quit and rejoin minutes later with a reservation.

Eventually, it was very narrowly voted that Iceland could not rejoin with a reservation: the whalers lost the important vote by a hairsbreadth. They left London determined to gain a majority by next year's meeting.

Norway declared that it plans to sell hundreds of tons of blubber to Japan, despite the high concentration of toxic chemicals and heavy metals, and despite a promise to the United States that it would refrain from such trade if the US chose not to enact sanctions against its continuing commercial whaling.

When asked by Austria whether the nutritional needs of the Makah Indians for Gray Whale meat have been ascertained (a precondition for granting an aboriginal whaling quota), the commissioner of the United States stated that a recent Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) adequately addressed the matter. However, the EIS did not.

Lastly, the revised management scheme was relegated to working groups under the auspices of the Netherlands. They will now meet in private (away from the big ears of non-governmental observers and media) and report to the commission next year. AWI joined 135 other groups in the Global Whale Alliance to weigh in against the completion of any RMS. We oppose any resumption of commercial whaling, and the RMS is a pseudo-scientific formula for whaling.

An extensive report commissioned by New Zealand and presented at the meeting shows that whale watching is now a billion dollar a year business worldwide, making far more money than whale killing ever did or would. It's time to give up the slaughter forever.