
2002: IWC54 in Shimonoseki, Japan

by Ben White

The combative tenor of the 54th annual conference of the International Whaling Commission (IWC) was set the day before the opening gavel struck on Monday, May 20 in the whaling city of Shimonoseki, Japan. Just off the bullet train from Tokyo, I was met by a huge and raucous demonstration of thousands of ultra-right Japanese nationalists circling the streets in 160 big, black busses with loudspeakers blaring from their roofs. In a deafening call-and response, one speaker would shout through his microphone, then 159 others would shout into theirs. Advocating the full scale resumption of commercial whaling, the demonstrators played martial music from World War II days and chanted "Greenpeace Go Home." The group embraces modern Shinto and believes that the Emperor of Japan is a deity. Ironically, Old Shinto is an ancient religion that believes that streams and forests and, presumably, whales are sacred.

As it turned out, irony was the one constant of a topsyturvy week. I never would have thought that a pivotal meeting in a whaling center would result in:

Japan

- o failing to win a resumption of commercial whaling through the adoption of a toothless "revised management scheme";
- o blocking whaling by opposing the US/Russian proposal for an aboriginal subsistence quota of bowhead whales for the Inuits;
- o failing to win acceptance of its bid, submitted every year since 1984, to allow four coastal towns to take 50 minke whales a year in a commercial hunt- Japan said it would allow the hunting anyway under the heading of "scientific whaling";
- o failing to win a simple majority in its annual request for a secret ballot to hide its bought votes, despite its recruitment of four new countries to vote its way this year (Benin, Gabon, Mongolia, and Palau);
- o failing in its effort to force the acceptance of Iceland into the commission (Iceland is insisting that it be able to join with a reservation on the moratorium on commercial whaling, even though it voted for the moratorium before quitting the IWC ten years ago);
- o succeeding in blocking the adoption of a new South Pacific Sanctuary, a success tempered by the adoption of sanctuaries by New Zealand, Australia, and other Pacific nations within their own waters (extending 200 miles); and

The United States

- o losing, in the most dramatic IWC slap at the country since 1972, the Alaskan Inuit bowhead quota- aboriginal subsistence whaling quotas are almost always agreed to by consensus (this time the bowhead quota was held hostage by the Japanese linkage with its own perennially rejected request for a commercial coastal whaling allotment of 50 minke whales; its message was 100% politicaljousting: if we don't get what we want, you don't get what you want);
- o giving in on the hotly contested issue of increasing St. Vincent/Grenadine's annual quota of humpback whales from two to four, despite its repeated illegal slaughter of mother and calf pairs (a deal struck in a private commissioner's meeting appeared to give St. Vincent its quota if the US and Russia got their bowhead quota, but once the St. Vincent quota was approved, the whalers reneged);

- o seeing its two primary skeletons in the closet- Makah whaling and low frequency active (LFA) sonar--openly questioned in the plenary. Mexican commissioner Andres Rosental, who emerged at this conference as the whales' strongest champion, objected both to the Makah being granted whaling rights without demonstrating nutritional need and to the joining of the US and Russian request to take gray whales, avoiding the Makah quota passing muster on its own. The safety of LFA was brought up by the members of the scientific committee and their concerns passed on by their chairwoman. In response, alternate US commissioner Mike Tillman gave a deadpan reading of a statement attesting that the effect of LFA on marine mammals will be minimal.

The Consequences

Even though the IWC has long been derided justifiably as the whalers' club, its mandate is actually both to conserve whales and to facilitate whaling, a mandate that could be argued is self-contradictory. Those wanting whales protected are looking, as always, beyond the 48-member IWC to the meeting this fall of the 158-member Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). The concern is that if the IWC is seen to be losing its grasp on its ability to regulate and control ("allow") whaling, then CITES could step in to approve the "down listing" and trade of certain species of whale. Indeed, over the past several years the increasingly combative Japanese delegation appears to follow a strategy of tying the IWC in knots so it can then go to CITES and say that the IWC isn't working.

This year, with the Japanese intransigence at the meeting being so dramatic, the argument will be easier to make at CITES that it is the Japanese who are obstructing progress within the IWC, and that they should not be rewarded by superceding the responsibilities of the IWC and allowing whale meat trade while there is a commercial moratorium in place.

The issue that might make the whole argument on whaling moot is the increasing awareness in Japan that much whale meat and almost all dolphin meat (often labeled as whale meat) is contaminated heavily with mercury and other heavy metals. Having suffered a disastrous bout of mercury contamination in Minamata Bay in the 1970s, Japanese consumers are very concerned with food safety. For the first time, 30% of the whale meat obtained through Japan's "research whaling" went unsold last year. An April poll published in the Asahi Shim bun newspaper reported that only four percent of those polled ate whale meat "sometimes." The same paper headlined an article, "Changing Tastes May Sink Whaling Fleet," pointing out that despite the posturing and arguing within the IWC, if the Japanese people stop buying whale meat, the industry will collapse.

Just a month before the conference, the Japanese government took the unprecedented step of ruling that the meat from five sperm whales could not be sold as human food because it contained 1.47 parts per million of mercury, more than three times the legal limit. To dramatize this action, I made a fifteen-foot tall, sperm whale costume. Working with the Japanese group Safety First! I was able to get a permit to walk my whale to the front of the IWC venue on the last day of the conference. One side of the whale read "WARNING MERCURY," and on the other side was the Japanese translation (the four kanji literally said "SilverWater-Crises-Rough Adventure"). As I approached the conference center inside the costume, the crowd of media peeled away from the entrance and surrounded me. One of the photographs wound up on page two of the May 28 New York Times, illustrating an article entitled "Yuk, No More Stomach for Whales."

One critical outstanding question remains: Will the US allow the Alaskan Inuit whalers to go after bowhead whales next spring even if the IWC has not given its permission?