

---

# 2003: IWC55 in Berlin, Germany

The differences of opinion at the annual meetings of the International Whaling Commission are so familiar and fundamental that observers have become accustomed to deadlock. But this year in Berlin, where the Commission met in plenary session from June 16-19, it was hard not to feel the logjam breaking up—in the whales' favor.

On the very first day, over the thunderous objections of the Norwegian and Japanese delegations and their supporters, the Commission gavelled into existence a new conservation committee by a vote of 25-20. Normally, the creation of yet another committee would hardly be cause for celebration, but this one clearly signaled a shift towards whale protection and away from the killing of whales. The new committee was fought vigorously by the whalers because it will focus on conservation, and gather information and recommend solutions on bycatch (drowning of whales and dolphins in fishing nets) and the growing environmental threats to whales such as toxic contamination and LFA sonar, information not likely to bolster their assertion that there are plenty of healthy whales to kill. Nongovernmental organizations will need to work hard with their governments over the next year to see this committee become effective; Japan, Norway, Iceland, and their allies have stated their intent to undermine the decision.

The vote spread also indicated that the Japanese have perhaps hit a high-water mark in their purchase of the commission through "economic assistance" to developing countries. Although they added two more countries to their chorus line (Nicaragua and Belize), they still lack the numbers to carry a simple majority, much less the 3/4 vote necessary on "schedule changes" such as dropping the moratorium on commercial whaling. While they were able to block important major initiatives such as the creation of whale sanctuaries in the South Pacific and South Atlantic, they could not stop the conservation committee, two votes condemning their bogus "scientific" whaling, the vote against their "small-scale coastal whaling," or the vote against allowing secret ballots. In a low moment before the conservation committee discussion, Japan and its pro-whaling allies moved to strike all conservation issues from the agenda; fortunately, that was turned back.

Apparently, Japan's whaling industry has collided with a new economic powerhouse with far more clout than even they can muster: whale watching. The newly formed International Association of Whale Watchers attended the meeting for the first time and gave a press conference announcing their formidable presence. More and more developing countries are beginning to realize significant economic and social benefits from whale-watching tourism. In just a few years, the industry has ballooned to an annual income of one billion U.S. dollars spread across 97 countries, giving them an economic relevance that whale-killing can't touch.

Iceland may offer the first showdown between whaling and whale-watching. Having re-joined the Commission this year with its reservation on the moratorium on commercial whaling intact, Iceland immediately announced its intention to begin its own yearly "scientific" whale-kill of 100 fin whales and 50 sei whales (classified as endangered by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature) as early as 2004. Despite the belligerence of their Commissioner, Stefan Asmundsson, within the IWC, these plans may be derailed by pressure at home. Icelandic whale watchers, who earned over \$8 million from 90,000 visitors in 2001, have joined with Icelandair and the powerful Icelandic fishery industry to oppose the resumption of whaling.

Other information presented leaves no doubt that killing whales for food in the year 2003 is a brutal anachronism:

- Some whales take as long as five hours to die when struck by harpoons, a new report presents the possibility that some whales are conscious when butchered.
- The World Wildlife Fund estimates that 300,000 dolphins and whales are killed yearly after becoming entangled in fishing nets.
- Greenland's so-called aboriginal subsistence whaling was criticized for its huge commercial component and the recent slaughter of 32 orca whales.

AWI has attended the IWC meetings since the Commission's inception. We oppose all forms of whaling except those that are truly necessary for aboriginal subsistence.