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WHALES, WHALING & THE INTERNATIONAL WHALING COMMISSION

WWF POSITION ON WHALING AND THE IWC

- WWF's goal is to ensure that viable populations of all cetacean species occupy their historical range, and fulfil their role in maintaining the integrity of ocean ecosystems. We work at a local level and across a broad range of international fora to address and reduce threats to cetaceans. In doing so, WWF acknowledges the widely varied cultural attitudes toward the conservation and management of whales.
- WWF opposes commercial whaling, now and until WWF is convinced that the governments of the world have brought whaling under international control, with a precautionary and conservation-based enforceable management and compliance system adhered to by the whaling nations.
- The IWC has an important contribution to make to the conservation of all cetaceans, but the current stalemate caused by the Contracting Governments is adding to the many threats faced by both the great whales and small cetaceans. WWF urges governments to make the IWC an effective international forum for the conservation of all cetaceans, particularly those that are endangered, and to work to minimise adverse human impacts from commercial exploitation, marine pollution, climate change, ship strikes, fisheries bycatch, noise pollution, and other human-caused threats.
- WWF continues to oppose the resumption in international trade in whale parts and products, and supports the retention on CITES Appendix I of all whale species and stocks protected from commercial whaling by the IWC.
- WWF recognises the human need for aboriginal subsistence whaling where it is carried out by aboriginal, indigenous, or native peoples with long-standing, strong social or cultural ties to whaling; where products are for local consumption only; and with a precautionary management scheme in place to ensure such activities are sustainable and do not threaten whale populations.



INTRODUCTION

Humanity's complex relationship with whales and dolphins is marked by contradiction, ranging from reverence, affinity, and cultural significance to one of history's darkest chapters in the unsustainable exploitation of any wild species. Few animals on land or sea inspire such awe as whales, yet relatively few have suffered so severely at human hands. WWF's campaign to end uncontrolled commercial whaling is part of a much broader effort to minimise human impacts on all cetaceans, whether from commercial exploitation, marine pollution, climate change, ship strikes, fisheries by-catch, or other human-caused threats. In the context of the International Whaling Commission, WWF is working to promote conservation of all cetaceans as well as to ensure that commercial exploitation never again threatens any species of whale.

STATUS OF AND THREATS TO WHALES

Today, populations of nearly all the great whales are at depressed levels, a legacy of unsustainable whaling during the last two centuries. As long-lived mammals with slow reproductive cycles whales inevitably take several decades or more to recover from population depletion. Some, such as the North Atlantic right and Antarctic blue whales, survive as a few hundred individuals at the brink of extinction, having failed to rebound from past exploitation. Others are believed to be recovering to healthier levels, although whale population estimates nearly always have a very large margin of uncertainty. While whaling remains a concern, other threats may ultimately exact a greater toll on whales. Bycatch in fishing operations is the most pressing threat to cetaceans worldwide. Scientists studying the impacts of bycatch on cetaceans now estimate that over 300,000 whales, dolphins and porpoises die each year in gillnets and other types of fishing gear.

Accumulation of DDT, PCBs, and other toxic contaminants in the marine food chain is already affecting some whales and dolphins and may endanger their immune systems and ability to reproduce. The impacts of global over-fishing on the food supplies of many whale and dolphin species are unknown. Rapid climate change in the next few decades is expected to disrupt whale distribution, migration patterns, and breeding.

Such broad-based threats to the marine environment are difficult to address in ways that will alleviate harm to whales specifically, and make it all the more important that whales are not also threatened by uncontrolled commercial whaling.

WHALING AND THE IWC

The International Whaling Commission (IWC) was established under the 1946 International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling (ICRW), and is the sole international regulatory body charged with the management of cetaceans. The need for international co-operation for the conservation, management and study of cetaceans was recognised by the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (Articles 65 and 120), and reaffirmed by Agenda 21 (Chapter 17) as essential for these highly migratory species.

Despite the global moratorium on commercial whaling put in place by the IWC in 1986, whales are still being caught commercially. More than 25,000 whales of five different species have been killed by commercial whalers during the moratorium, and the rate is increasing. Japan continues to catch hundreds of whales annually (many in the Southern Ocean, designated by the member states as an IWC whale sanctuary), exploiting a loophole for 'scientific research', and sells the meat commercially in Japan. Iceland, after rejoining the IWC in 2003, immediately began its own "scientific whaling" programme, and in 2006 resumed commercial whaling issuing licences totalling nine fin whales and 30 minke whales for the year ending 31 August 2007. Norway conducts a commercial hunt under a legal "objection" to the moratorium.

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The actions of these nations undermine the spirit and intent of the moratorium, and proceed without IWC approval and in the face of repeated censure by the Commission. In 2002, and again in 2004, Japan tried to re-open international commercial trade in whale products by submitting a proposal to the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). Those proposals were soundly rejected. This year, Japan has asked for the listing of all cetaceans on Appendix 1 of CITES to be reviewed. WWF believes that competency for catch limits lies with the IWC and such a review is an effort to undermine the IWC's moratorium on commercial whaling.

Japan's so called "scientific" whaling programme took record levels of whales in the 2005/06 season, with quotas now set for humpback whales, fin whales, sei whales, sperm and Bryde's whales, as well as two species of minke.

FUTURE OF THE IWC

The IWC's mandate requires first and foremost that it prevent the return of uncontrolled large-scale commercial whaling. This is the near-term agenda by which it will be judged and is currently the main contribution it has to offer conservation of cetaceans more broadly. However, the 1946 ICRW was negotiated at a time before the broad range of threats to cetaceans were understood, and indeed before some of today's threats were recognised to exist (*e.g.*, toxic waste disposal, climate change, ship strikes, and gear entanglement). Furthermore, the ICRW predates the developed of ecosystem based approaches, which are now the internationally accepted norm and necessitate a holistic approach to management that ensures all aspects of biodiversity and biological processes are conserved. In the more than 50 years since the Convention text was adopted, it has become impossible to separate the threats presented by commercial whaling from those of marine pollution, commercial by-catch, or over-fishing. Nor is it possible to draw an arbitrary boundary between large and small cetaceans when both are subjected to commercial harvesting, the latter largely unregulated internationally. It would now be far preferable, and of greater potential conservation benefit to cetaceans, to address all of the threats to *all* cetacean populations, and the resulting impacts on the ecosystems in which they live, in a broad, multilateral context.

WWF recognises that the ICRW is currently the only international instrument available to formally address all cetaceans and all threats to their continued existence. WWF also values the important contributions of the IWC Scientific Committee on this broader range of conservation issues and species, and urges the IWC to expand its work to formally address directed take of small cetaceans, pollution, gear entanglement and by-catch, ship strikes, and the impacts of over-fishing on cetacean food resources. For the IWC to remain relevant over the long term it must expand its scope to address the other human activities which threaten cetaceans and focus action on ensuring the survival of the most threatened species.

In addition, there is a need to improve the effectiveness of the IWC's operations through, for example, improvements to the rules of procedure; improvements in information management and dissemination; improvements in communications with nations who are not Contracting Governments; and closer working relationships among Contracting Governments, observer NGOs, and the Secretariat. Consistent with standard practice in other intergovernmental fora, there is also a need to provide representatives of civil society worldwide, the non-governmental organisations, real opportunities to contribute to the work and mission of the IWC, and to participate actively in the work of the IWC and its committees.

WWF calls upon all countries to take responsible action, to act in the best conservation interests of all cetaceans, and to move the IWC forward into the 21st Century.

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