



WWF

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THE HISTORY OF WHALING AND THE INTERNATIONAL WHALING COMMISSION

WHERE DID THE IDEA OF THE INTERNATIONAL WHALING COMMISSION COME FROM AND WHY?

Whaling as an industry began around the 11th Century when the Basques started hunting and trading the products from the northern right whale (now one of the most endangered of the great whales). They were followed first by the Dutch and the British, and later by the Americans, Norwegians and many other nations. Humpback and sperm whales were the next targets of commercial whaling, with oil for lighting and other uses as the most important product. In the late nineteenth century the whaling industry was transformed by the development of steam powered ships, enabling the hunting of faster blue and fin whales, and of the explosive harpoon, enabling further reach and increased accuracy. The new technology, coupled with the depletion of whales in the rest of the world, led to the spread of hunting to the Antarctic, where huge concentrations of feeding whales made large-scale whaling highly profitable. The First World War provided a large market for explosives using glycerine from baleen whale oil provided by British and Norwegian whaling in the Antarctic. Meanwhile Japanese whaling had developed separately as a coastal industry, mainly for humpback, right and grey whales.

Since whales migrate world-wide through both coastal waters and the open oceans, the need for international co-operation in their conservation became evident. By 1925, the League of Nations recognised that whales were over-exploited and that there was a need to regulate whaling activities. In 1930, the Bureau of International Whaling Statistics was set up in order to keep track of catches. This was followed by the first international regulatory agreement, the Convention for the Regulation of Whaling, which was signed by 22 nations in 1931. However, some of the major whaling nations, including Germany and Japan, did not join and 43,000 whales were killed that same year.

With species after species of the great whales being hunted close to extinction, various nations met throughout the 1930s attempting to bring order to the industry. Finally, in 1948 the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling (ICRW) came into force. The Preamble states that "Recognising the interest of the nations of the world in safeguarding for future generations the great natural resources represented by the whale stocks.....having decided to conclude a convention to provide for the proper conservation of whale stocks and thus make possible the orderly development of the whaling industry". The International Whaling Commission (IWC) was established as its decision-making body, originally with 14 member states. The IWC meets annually and adopts regulations on catch limits, whaling methods and protected areas, on the basis of a three-quarters majority vote. In recent years the IWC, recognizing new threats to whales, has moved towards a broader conservation agenda which includes incidental catches in fishing gear and concerns related to global environmental change. Whale hunting by indigenous people, called "aboriginal subsistence" whaling, is subject to different IWC controls than those on commercial whaling.

Today the IWC has 52 member states, including whaling countries, ex-whaling countries, and countries that have never had whaling industries but joined either to have a voice in the conservation of whales or to support whaling interests.



SUCSESSES AND FAILURES OF THE IWC

For the first 15 years of its existence the IWC acted as a “whalers club” and imposed hardly any effective restrictions on whaling. Catch limits were set far too high and, since the IWC lacks a compliance and enforcement programme, were often exceeded. These management shortfalls resulted in the continued depletion of species after species. In particular, huge declines occurred in the Antarctic, where in the 1961/62 season, the peak was reached with over 66,000 whales killed. By then however it was becoming increasingly hard for the whalers to find enough whales to kill. From a pre-whaling population of about 250,000 blue whales in the Southern Hemisphere, there are now estimated to be fewer than 1,500 remaining.

Also in 1961, WWF was founded and accepted the challenge of reversing the declines in whale populations. 'Save the whales' campaigns spread around the world, promoting calls for whale sanctuaries and a moratorium on commercial whaling (most notably by the UN Conference on the Human Environment in 1972). Instead of implementing a moratorium, in 1974 the IWC adopted a New Management Procedure (NMP), designed to set quotas on the grounds of scientific assessments and sustainability. However, the NMP was not precautionary at all; it depended on having much more information on whale stocks than was available, quotas were still set too high, compliance was still lacking, and whale populations continued to decline.

At the 1979 IWC meeting, a moratorium on all whaling using factory ships (with an exception for minke whales) was agreed. The IWC also declared the entire Indian Ocean as a whale sanctuary. From then on, successful non-lethal whale research took place in that area (some of it funded by WWF). However, it was also revealed that the USSR had been falsifying reported numbers and species caught on a massive scale, with the meat being sold to Japan. Conservation concerns expressed by scientists, WWF and other conservation organizations and conservation-minded governments grew deeper.

At the 1982 IWC meeting, a proposal for a moratorium on all commercial whaling, to come into force in 1986, was tabled by the Seychelles. The vote was comfortably won with a majority of 25 to 7, with five abstentions. Japan, Norway, and the USSR subsequently lodged official objections giving them exemption from the moratorium, but Japan withdrew its reservation as of the 1987/88 season.

Because of the problems with the New Management Procedure, the IWC asked its Scientific Committee to produce a fail-safe management system that could ensure that any future commercial whaling would never again deplete whale stocks. In 1994, the Revised Management Procedure (RMP), a set of precautionary rules for setting catch limits, was agreed by IWC Resolution, although not formally adopted into the IWC ‘Schedule’, or rules of operation. The RMP is designed as one part of a Revised Management Scheme (RMS) which would also include rules for conducting surveys of whale numbers and for the inspection and observation of commercial whaling. Continued controversy regarding the need for additional safeguards that would prevent any repetition of past abuses has so far prevented the adoption of the RMS.

In 1994, after an intensive campaign by WWF and other NGOs, the 50 million square km. Southern Ocean Whale Sanctuary came into force. In the long term this should ensure the recovery of the world’s whale populations that have suffered most from exploitation. However, although several countries initiated non-lethal research in the Southern Ocean Sanctuary, Japan is still conducting lethal so-called “scientific” whaling within the boundaries of the Sanctuary, as well as in the North Pacific.



THE CURRENT SITUATION IN THE IWC

Over recent decades, the IWC has taken some encouraging steps in changing its emphasis towards conserving and studying whales, most recently in 2003 with the establishment of a Conservation Committee. However, the whaling nations of Japan, Norway and Iceland retain politically influential whaling industries that wish to carry on whaling on as large a scale as possible. All three countries are exploiting loopholes in the Whaling Convention in order to kill more than 1200 whales each year in spite of the IWC's moratorium on whaling. Norway hunts whales under its objection to the moratorium, and Japan has been whaling under the guise of "scientific research" (see WWF document "Irresponsible Science, Irresponsible Whaling"). Most recently, Iceland joined the IWC with a formal objection to the moratorium and, although claiming they would not undertake commercial whaling before 2006, immediately began a "scientific whaling" program. The current membership of the IWC is approximately evenly divided between whaling and non-whaling nations, resulting in a political deadlock which makes it impossible to secure the $\frac{3}{4}$ majority of votes needed to make major changes. All in all, whaling is taking place and increasing yearly without any international control.

While the debate has raged over how best to manage commercial whaling, emerging threats to the future of all cetacean populations have begun to be addressed by the IWC, both within its Commission and its Scientific Committee. Among the important conservation issues under consideration have been: conservation of "small" cetaceans; incidental catches in fishing gear (by-catch); whale watching; protection of highly endangered species and populations; whales and their environment (including toxic chemicals and other marine pollution); ecosystem management concerns; sanctuaries; enforcement and compliance; management of "scientific whaling"; and collaboration with other organizations. These issues, of critical importance to the future of all cetaceans, now constitute a broad and growing, although controversial, conservation agenda within the IWC."

THE IWC IN THE 21ST CENTURY

The IWC's mandate requires first and foremost that it prevent the return of uncontrolled large-scale commercial whaling. The 1946 ICRW, however, was negotiated at a time before the broad range of threats to cetaceans were understood or even recognised to exist - tied not only to an era which had little understanding of the complex web of marine issues facing all cetaceans, but also to a very different political era than the one in which it exists today. 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. It is far preferable, and of greater potential conservation to cetaceans, to now address all of the threats to cetacean populations in a broad, multilateral context, as the IWC has begun to do. The ICRW is currently the only international instrument available to formally address all cetaceans and all threats to their continued existence. WWF believes the IWC must continue to expand its scope to address the other human activities which threaten cetaceans and focus action on ensuring the survival of the most threatened species.



Key dates

- 1925 League of Nations recognises over exploitation of whales
- 1930 Bureau of International Whaling Statistics set up
- 1931 First international regulatory agreement
Bowhead whale protected
- 1935 Northern & Southern Right whale protected
- 1937 Gray whale protected
- 1946 International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling agreed
- 1949 International Whaling Commission established
- 1961 Highest known number of whales killed (66 000)
- 1963 Humpback whales protected in Southern Hemisphere
- 1967 Blue whales protected in Southern Hemisphere
- 1979 Indian Ocean Sanctuary established
Moratorium on factory ship whaling (except for minkes)
Sei whales protected (some exceptions)
- 1981 Sperm whales protected (some exceptions)
- 1982 IWC moratorium on commercial whaling agreed
- 1986 IWC moratorium on commercial whaling comes into force
- 1987/8 Japan begins scientific whaling
- 1989 Lowest known number of whales hunted (326)
- 1992 North Atlantic Marine Mammals Commission (NAMMCO) established
- 1993 Norway resumes commercial whaling under objection to the moratorium
- 1994 Southern Ocean Whale Sanctuary established
RMP approved
- 1997 Numbers of minke whales killed for commercial and "scientific" purposes by Japan and Norway increase to over 1,000 animals.
- 2000 Japan extends its scientific whaling to include Bryde's and sperm whales as well as Northern and Southern minkes.
- 2001 Norway announces the resumption of international trade in whale meat and blubber (although this does not take place).
- 2002 Japan extends its scientific whaling to include endangered sei whales.
(October) Iceland succeeds in rejoining IWC with a reservation to the moratorium, valid after 2006.
- 2003 Iceland begins "scientific whaling" on minke whales
- 2004 Resolution approved to begin formal RMS talks"