

A GLOBAL SANCTUARY FOR WHALES

A Global Strategy for Protecting the Great Whales

Whales need a Sanctuary

Whales face threats from many sources, including pollution and climate change. They are also directly threatened by commercial whale hunting. 1100 were killed for profit in 1998 alone, and the numbers are increasing every year.

Sanctuaries—a safe place, a place of refuge—give whales freedom from one of these threats: commercial whaling.



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In the past, commercial whaling has always led to over-exploitation and depletion of whale populations. By the 1990s blue whales—the largest in existence—were almost wiped out by hunting, their numbers in the Southern Hemisphere reduced from a quarter of a million to around a thousand. Fin whales, once thought to number half a million in the Southern Hemisphere, fell to around 20,000.

After decades of uncontrolled whaling and collapsing whale populations, an international moratorium on commercial whaling was introduced in 1986.

However some countries—notably Japan and Norway—have exploited loopholes in the moratorium in order to continue killing whales for profit. They have also argued that, by definition, a moratorium was never meant to be permanent.

Japan continues to hunt whales under the guise of “scientific” whaling, while Norway simply ignores the ban.

Greenpeace wants to strengthen current protection for whales by implementing a series of regional sanctuaries, resulting in the longer term in a Global Whale Sanctuary.

Building on the Present

The idea of sanctuaries for whales is not new.

The body responsible for ensuring the healthy state of whale populations, the International Whaling Commission, agreed in 1979 to establish the Indian Ocean Whale Sanctuary, protecting whales in their breeding and calving grounds.

Fifteen years later, in 1994, the IWC established the Southern Ocean Sanctuary. This covers all waters surrounding Antarctica and protects three-quarters of the world’s whales in their feeding grounds.

At the 1998 meeting of the IWC, plans for two further sanctuaries were put forward. These included the South Pacific Whale Sanctuary, suggested by Australia and New Zealand and the South Atlantic Sanctuary, suggested by Brazil. If accepted, these new sanctuaries would start where the Southern Ocean Sanctuary ends.

Extending Protection for the Great Whales

This coverage from the freezing waters of the Antarctic to the warm waters of the equator is vital. Most of the great whales are highly migratory, feeding in the nutrient-rich waters of the Antarctic before travelling to tropical waters to give birth and suckle their young. They then make the long migration back to their feeding grounds.

Since whales rarely cross the equator, establishment of these sanctuaries would mean that the whales of the Southern Hemisphere could live their entire lives in an area free from commercial whaling.

Rogue Nations Defy Moratorium on Commercial Whaling.

Norway and Japan have continued to hunt whales in defiance of the 1986 ban, and in the face of overwhelming worldwide public opinion.

Norway hunts whales commercially off its own coasts and Japan is pressing the IWC to allow it to do the same. In 1998 Norway hunted down 624 whales. In addition, Japan has refused to renounce high seas whaling, using factory ships capable of whaling thousands of miles from its home. This it justifies as “scientific” whaling. Using this excuse, Japan killed 389 whales in the Southern Ocean in 1999.

Japan is not only defying the moratorium and opposing new sanctuaries, it is actually pressing to abolish the world’s largest, the Southern Ocean Sanctuary, only five years after it was adopted.

Whale Watching: Commerce Without Killing

Japan’s whale hunt produces an annual income of about 36 million dollars. Norway’s hunt produces about five million dollars a year. Worldwide income from wholesale sales of whale meat is approximately 41 million dollars a year.

But whale watching is a much bigger industry—with an income of over half a BILLION dollars a year worldwide. And it is continuing to grow.

In addition to promoting research and conservation, sanctuaries will help encourage whale watching and the industry that develops around it.

Increasing numbers of people who have seen whales in natural habitats are supporting global shelter for them. They want to see the whales they watch protected, not being hunted.

Message of Hope

Sanctuaries are a forward-thinking measure. They make economic sense, help protect whales and encourage research on whales and the environment. They send a clear message of hope that the world is turning away from whaling and that there will be no return to the commercial hunting which devastated one population after another.