GREENPEACE Briefing

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WHAT IS WRONG WITH WHALING

Commercial whaling is one of the most environmentally destructive practices of all time and was responsible in the last century for taking many populations to the brink of extinction Yet the Fisheries Agency of Japan is determined to secure a return to large-scale commercial whaling and a hunt taking thousands of whales every year. Supported by Norway (the only other country still whaling) which wants to resume the lucrative trade in whale products to Japan, and a number of countries whose votes in the IWC have been bought (see Buying a Return to Commercial Whaling briefing), Japan claims that things are different now and that somehow whaling will not lead to the depletion of whale populations and can be controlled. This is not the case. There is overwhelming evidence that demonstrates that commercial whaling inevitably leads to the depletion of whale populations and that only a permanent ban on whaling can ensure the survival of the world's remaining whales.

A SHAMEFUL HISTORY

The history of the commercial whaling industry is one of repeated over-exploitation which took many populations of whales to the brink of extinction. It has been estimated that in the fifty years from 1925-1975 over 1.5 million whales were killed in total. Nowhere was this devastation more marked than in the waters around Antarctica where three quarters of the world's great whales feed.

Enabled by the development of the explosive harpoon at the end of the 19th century and the introduction of the floating factory ship in 1925, the whaling fleets first targeted the largest and most profitable whale species - the blue whales. As these became more scarce they then targeted the next largest, the fin whales. This pattern of over-exploitation continued: when the fins too had been reduced in numbers it was then the turn of the sei and humpback whales. The scale of this devastation is staggering - for instance it is estimated that there were approximately a quarter of a million Antarctic blue whales before the advent of commercial whaling, now there are believed to be only around a thousand left. Fin whales, once thought to number half a million in the Southern Hemisphere, were reduced to about 20,000.

Finally after decades of uncontrolled whaling and collapsing whale populations, the International Whaling Commission (IWC) which had manifestly failed in its task to manage the whaling industry, introduced a moratorium on all commercial whaling which took effect in 1986.

COMMERCIAL WHALING - AN UNSUSTAINABLE INDUSTRY

There are a number of factors, both biological and economic, which led the whaling industry to destroy one whale population after another even though the industry was dependent on the survival of these populations for its own livelihood. These factors remain unchanged and, if anything, the

world's remaining whales are even more vulnerable than before due to man-made degradation of the world's oceans.

Although whalers often talk about 'whale fisheries', whales are mammals not fish and their biology precludes them from being managed in the same way. In stark contrast to the majority of fish species which produce vast quantities of eggs, whales are very slow to reproduce, producing a single calf only every one or two years. The calf then requires more than a year of maternal care before it is able to survive on its own and will take many years before it reaches maturity and can itself reproduce. For these biological reasons whale populations are very slow to recover from commercial exploitation.

In addition, it is extremely difficult to count whales accurately or make assumptions about the health of a particular population. Population estimates are calculated by extrapolating survey data using mathematical formulas devised to compensate for the uneven distribution of whales in the oceans and the fact that observers on survey vessels will only see some of the whales in a given area. Such difficulties mean that there are many opportunities for errors to creep in to the scientists' calculations and many population estimates are only accurate to within plus or minus 50 percent. Add to this the whales' slow reproductive rate and it becomes clear why it is virtually impossible to determine underlying population trends. Such scientific uncertainty only underscores the need to adopt a precautionary approach.

Already highly vulnerable to commercial exploitation as a consequence of their biology, whales now also face a bewildering array of human-induced environmental threats. There is a growing body of evidence which shows how climate change, ozone depletion, toxic and noise pollution and prey depletion through over-fishing are already exerting negative impacts on whales. (For further information see Greenpeace report *Whales in a Degraded Ocean*).

MINKE WHALES IN PRECIPITOUS DECLINE?

Despite the moratorium and the fact that the waters around Antarctica are a designated whale sanctuary, the Japanese whaling fleet is currently hunting minke whales in the Southern Ocean. Japan's primary justification for the hunt is the relative abundance of minke whales in the Southern Ocean but the status of even this highly studied population is far from certain.

The minke whale was originally considered too small to be worth hunting by the Antarctic whaling fleets and so was not targeted until the 1970s. When the whaling moratorium came into force, the minke whale was the only one of the Antarctic great whale species to be found in anything near its original numbers. Until recently a Japanese population estimate of 760,000 has been the generally accepted figure for this population. However, when the IWC Scientific Committee examined more recent survey data at this year's meeting, they came to the conclusion that the real figure was 'appreciably' lower and might be less than half of what was previously thought.

The IWC scientists could not agree on an explanation for the difference between the old and new figures but have put forward three possible reasons as listed below:

- Changes in the way the data were collected
- The whales had migrated out of the survey areas
- A real decrease in the number of whales

The Scientific Committee does not favour any one of these explanations, but Japanese scientists are asserting very strongly that the entire difference is due to changes in counting methods. Non-Japanese scientists with Antarctic experience say that a change in counting methods is unlikely to provide the explanation. They believe that there has been a real change in minke whale abundance. Such a drop in minke whale abundance might be linked to global warming as associated decreases

in the extent of sea ice may in turn have reduced the amount of krill available for the minke whales to eat.

COMMERCIAL WHALING - AN UNCONTROLLABLE INDUSTRY

Although the whalers were well aware that the numbers of whales on which they were dependent were dwindling as far back as 1946 when the IWC was first formed, the whaling industry continued to take far more whales than the populations could withstand, because its primary concern was with making a profit. The high value of whale products, then as now, was the driver for the industry and led not only to the whaling nations consistently ignoring scientific advice and taking clearly unsustainable quotas but also to widespread cheating.

Nowhere was this more prevalent than in the former Soviet Union. In 1994 it was finally revealed how the Soviet whaling fleet had over the course of 40 years systematically carried out the falsification of catch records. Some of this cheating had occurred when there were international observers onboard. For instance for the 1961/2 season the Soviets claimed that their four whaling fleets had only killed 270 humpback whales, but in reality one fleet had killed 1,568 in total. Although the scale of this cheating is remarkable, cheating was not confined to the USSR.

This year Mr Kondo, a former executive of Nihon Hogei K.K. (Japan Whaling Co. Ltd), published his memoirs which detailed the various methods used by the Japanese coastal whaling stations right up until the moratorium to manipulate catch data. As well as failing to report whales caught this included converting the catches of undersized sperm whales to fewer large whales, stretching the bodies of undersized whales and intentionally mis-reporting the sex of female sperm whales. Sometimes inspectors would be taken out to dinner when these illegal activities were taking place. The incentive as always was increased profits.

COMMERCIAL WHALING - AN INVITATION TO PIRATE WHALING & ILLEGAL TRADE

The high value of each individual whale has also proved irresistible to pirate whalers (whalers who whale outside of the auspices of the IWC) who have scant regard as to whether a particular whale is endangered or not. Although at present there is currently no legal international trade in whale products (due to a trade ban imposed by CITES), the very existence of a market for whale meat in Japan provides sufficient cover for pirate whalers. Whenever DNA testing is conducted to determine the origins of whale products for sale in Japan, illegal whale products are uncovered.

Even a recent survey conducted by the Institute of Cetacean Research (the private company which manages Japan's so-called 'scientific' whaling) revealed that 3.3% of samples it tested were from banned species, including fin and humpback whales. [1]

Similarly researchers working for International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) released earlier this year the results of DNA analysis of 129 samples purchased from a number of markets in Japan. The testing revealed that 100 of the samples were minke whale, two were sperm whale and two were Bryde's – the three species for which Japan issues hunting permits. But of the other 25 samples, two were humpback, five were from fin whale, one was sei whale, two were beaked whales, fourteen were dolphin and one was *horse*.

Most disturbingly however was the discovery in 2000 of gray whale products most likely to be from an individual from the western North Pacific population, one the rarest whales in the world with only 100 or so individuals left.

[1] Reuters News Service, 20 December 2000

Although DNA analysis can be a useful tool in detecting illegal whale products, it is not in itself a means of preventing pirate whaling. Yet both Japan and Norway present the setting up of DNA registers as an effective mechanism for controlling illegal trade.

REVISED MANAGEMENT SCHEME (RMS)

The case against commercial whaling is compelling and the combination of biological and economic factors that led to the mass depletion of whales in the past make the development of a management scheme that would adequately safeguard whale populations an impossibility. Many countries that were once whaling nations (including the UK, US, New Zealand and Australia) are now staunch advocates of whale conservation and yet the IWC has embarked on developing a new set of rules known as the Revised Management Scheme or RMS which could be used to manage whaling at some point in the near future and, if agreed, could herald the lifting of the moratorium.

The RMS is paving the way for a return to large-scale commercial whaling and Greenpeace is strongly opposed to its completion and adoption into the IWC Schedule. Greenpeace believes that the IWC should change its mission away from exploitation to conservation of whales and in particular it should concentrate on developing and implementing recovery plans for the most endangered populations of whales and continuing and expanding its work on environmental threats.

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