

Background briefing on US policy on commercial whaling

Introduction:

Every year both the US Congress and Senate pass resolutions calling on the Government to uphold the moratorium on commercial whaling. However, the US is currently negotiating a Revised Management Scheme (RMS) for the resumption of commercial whaling. By doing so, the present US delegation to the International Whaling Commission (IWC) appears to have changed policy and is contradicting a political and public mandate to uphold the moratorium and oppose any resumption of commercial whaling.

During the moratorium on commercial whaling, the IWC has been developing an RMS for any resumption of commercial whaling. The RMS must be adopted before the moratorium can be lifted. At last year's IWC annual meeting in Sorrento, the Commission agreed to hold two special intercessional meetings to try and complete an RMS 'package' for possible adoption at it's annual meeting in South Korea this June. The United States originally backed the proposal, along with Japan, which originally called for the RMS to be completed, and the moratorium lifted, at this year's IWC meeting in South Korea.

Whaling History

The commercial whaling industry has devastated the world's whale populations. One species after another, from the largest and most profitable to kill, to the smallest, were hunted then abandoned as their numbers crashed. Blue, fin, right, sperm, gray, humpback and sei whale populations have all been decimated over the past century. Some species have declined by more than 95% of their former numbers and entire populations have been wiped out.

In 1946, the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling (ICRW) founded the International Whaling Commission (IWC) in order to try and regulate an industry that threatened to exterminate the whales. Unfortunately, the IWC was dominated by whaling interests and for over 20 years the world's whale populations continued a drastic decline.

In 1972, a concerned United Nations called for an immediate ten-year moratorium on commercial whaling. In response, the IWC introduced a scientifically based quota management system for whaling in 1975, but this proved fundamentally flawed. After the failure of two management regimes, the IWC finally introduced an indefinite moratorium on all commercial whaling in 1986. However, by cynically exploiting legal loopholes in the Convention, the whalers have slaughtered over 25,000 whales during the moratorium and every year this number continues to rise.

Present whaling

This year, Japan, Norway and Iceland will slaughter around 1,500 whales between them. Japan is exploiting a loophole that allows IWC members to kill unlimited numbers of whales for scientific research. Japan is targeting minke whales and

endangered populations of Bryde's sei and sperm whales in a much criticised and expanding programme of 'research' that has never been approved by the IWC.

Norway lodged a formal objection to the moratorium and resumed commercial whaling in 1993. Norway's whalers have killed over 5,000 minke whales in the north-east Atlantic from a seriously depleted whale population that was already protected by the IWC before the moratorium was introduced. Last year, Norway announced plans to treble its unilateral annual quota up to a possible 1,500 whales each year. The Norwegian Government has made several attempts to export whale products to Japan despite an international ban on trade in whale products under CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species).

Iceland controversially rejoined the IWC after leaving in protest over the moratorium but not before killing hundreds of fin and sei whales for 'research'. The meat was exported to Japan. In 2002, Iceland controversially rejoined the IWC after lodging an objection to the moratorium. The Icelandic Government announced plans to kill 500 endangered fin, sei and minke whales over two years for 'research'. So far, around 70 minke whales have been taken after the Icelandic Government received an unprecedented protest from 23 IWC member countries, including the United States. Unfortunately, the IWC cannot enforce its own decisions and this has allowed the whalers to continue to undermine the moratorium with relative impunity.

Environmental threats to whales

Even without a resumption of full-scale commercial whaling, the world's surviving whale populations are under increasing threat from:

Climate change: rising ocean temperatures threaten to alter currents and disrupt major breeding and feeding grounds for whales. Research has revealed a massive decline in krill, a vital food source for whales, which may be caused by loss of sea-ice through global warming. Ocean temperatures are still rising and this rise shows no signs of abating.

Ozone loss: increasing UV radiation from the thinning ozone layer caused by our pollution is a major threat to phytoplankton, vital to all marine ecosystems.

Toxic pollutants: as top predators, whales bio-accumulate high levels of industrial toxins in their tissues. PCB's, DDT, dioxins and other persistent organic pollutants have been linked to cancer and damage to the immune and reproductive system in mammals, including humans. Studies suggest that regular consumption of whale meat, blubber and other organs can cause serious health problems in humans and developmental problems in children. Such is this concern, that public health warnings have been issued to limit whale consumption in Japan, Norway and the Faeroes.

Entanglement: at least 300,000 whales, dolphins and porpoises are killed in fishing gear every year. Entanglement in fishing nets poses a major threat to endangered whale populations. Meanwhile, commercial over-fishing is emptying our oceans of fish, threatening both whales and entire marine ecosystems with collapse. Most

recently, pro-whaling countries have claimed that whales have a major impact upon commercial fisheries when human over-fishing that is clearly to blame.

Ship-strikes: whales are victims to disturbance from increasing traffic and collisions with shipping. In some cases the situation has become critical. The northern Right whale population has been reduced to around 300 animals. Almost wiped out by whaling, the species may be extinct within 20 years and whales are still being killed or seriously injured by ship-strikes in US waters every year.

Noise pollution: is now considered a major threat to whales. Whales depend on sound to communicate, navigate, and find food. Increasing noise pollution from shipping, seismic surveys, oil and gas drilling and other human activities can disrupt the whales' ability to carry out these vital functions. It may also contribute to increasing ship strikes as whales fail to hear approaching ships. Meanwhile, the testing of intensely powerful military sonar, by the US and other countries, has been strongly implicated in the mass-stranding and deaths of whales after military exercises.

The Revised Management Scheme (RMS)

America's Whale Alliance (AWA) is opposed to any RMS that will lead to the resumption of commercial whaling. We do not believe the US should be supporting the resumption of commercial whaling. The proposed RMS 'package' is totally unacceptable in that:

- It is linked to the lifting of the moratorium on commercial whaling
- Proposals to monitor for illegal trade in whale meat are inadequate
- The cost of the RMS will be borne by all member states meaning US taxpayers would subsidise commercial whaling
- 'Scientific' whaling is permitted and can be used by whalers to 'top up' commercial quotas with whales killed for 'research'.
- Measures to monitor and enforce whaling, with sufficient penalties for non-compliance, are totally inadequate.
- There are no provisions to ensure whales are killed humanely.
- Commercial whaling could resume in designated whale sanctuaries.
- The whalers want to modify an agreed formula for calculating quotas in order to dramatically increase catches.

Political oversight

On the NOAA website it states the "U.S. representation in the IWC has no formal (legislated) advisory structure. The IWC Commissioner does consult, however, with the "IWC Interagency Committee," which includes representatives of the Department of State, the Marine Mammal Commission, other Federal agencies, conservation organizations, Native organizations, and other interested parties." Despite this, AWA is concerned that there is insufficient accountability for US policy at the IWC.

Conclusion:

The AWA believes that any resumption of commercial whaling in the foreseeable future would be extremely unpopular as well as grossly irresponsible. Firstly because the American people do not support commercial whaling, and secondly because of the growing environmental threats to whales that have not been adequately quantified or addressed.

Historically, the U.S. has been a strong advocate for whale conservation. In fact, previous Administrations have used the threat of economic sanctions to exact compliance with IWC agreements, including the existing moratorium on commercial whaling. Unfortunately, most recently, the US has chosen to strike bilateral deals with intransigent whalers rather than impose meaningful trade sanctions against Japan, Iceland and Norway for undermining IWC decisions. It is deeply regrettable that this has encouraged these countries to defy the IWC and seriously undermine whale conservation efforts.

The present US policy strongly suggests that the US delegation has unduly bowed to concerted Japanese pressure over its application for a domestic aboriginal whaling quota for Inuit hunters by backing the completion of the RMS and the lifting of the moratorium. As I write, US involvement in negotiations on the RMS are continuing, seemingly without due political and public consultation or accountability. We believe that the American public will not approve or support, this change in US policy on whaling.