

Letters

Commercial whaling despite the moratorium

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It is a common misconception that the whaling for primarily commercial purposes is “under permit from the International Whaling Commission (IWC)” (Knowles and Butterworth 2006). Despite the IWC moratorium on commercial whaling, Japan, and to a lesser extent, Iceland conduct ‘scientific’ whaling. Norway filed a formal objection to the moratorium and conducts openly commercial whaling. The whaling countries decide themselves how many whales to kill, rather than the IWC and the whaling that takes place now is less regulated than the whaling in the 1950s.

Article VIII of the 1946 whaling convention permits any contracting government to issue permits for its nationals to kill unlimited numbers of whales for scientific purposes regardless of any other provisions in the convention. Although Japan has to inform the International Whaling Commission in advance there is no requirement for Japan to take any notice of the views expressed by the IWC or its Scientific Committee. Article VIII was drafted over half a century ago when the way that whales were studied was by going through their entrails on the deck of a whaling ship.

Japan’s ‘scientific’ whaling dramatically increased following the IWC moratorium on commercial whaling which came into effect in 1986. Since then at least 9,500

whales have been killed in the name of science, not including the 220 whales Japan intended to catch this summer in the North Pacific but has not yet reported. Much of Japan’s whaling occurs within the Southern Ocean Sanctuary for whales which was adopted by the IWC in 1994. Only Japan voted against this historic decision and only Japan has decided not to respect it.

More than 40 resolutions have been adopted by the IWC criticising scientific whaling. In one such resolution the IWC states that Japan’s whaling is “not required for management”. Indeed key questions such as those regarding the size of whale populations can only be answered by non-lethal research, such as sighting surveys. Gales *et al* (2005) outline the controversial nature of Japan’s so-called scientific whaling which is clearly commercially driven.

Knowles and Butterworth (2006) are quite correct in drawing attention to the severe difficulties of killing whales humanely which result in a significant proportion dying agonising deaths. Animal welfare has been on the IWC’s agenda since the 1950s with UFAW being the first non-governmental organisation to raise concerns. Yet the response of the whaling countries at the 2006 IWC is to dispute the IWC’s competence on this matter. In the future they have said that they will further limit welfare-related data (Iceland supplies none at present, Japan will not submit further data to the IWC and Norway has no plans to collect further data on times to death).

References

- Gales NJ, Kasuya T, Clapham PJ and Brownell Jr RL** 2005 Japan’s whaling plan under scrutiny. *Nature* 435: 883-884
- Knowles TG and Butterworth A** 2006 Immediate immobilisation of a minke whale using a grenade harpoon requires striking a restricted target area. *Animal Welfare* 15: 55-57