



Humpback off Newfoundland

## Last Profits in Whales

In 1980 the International Whaling Commission, after masquerading as a conservation organisation for 32 years, has at last come out in its true colours. Despite the best efforts of a large group of conservation-minded nations, the whaling members of the IWC have made it clear that they are interested primarily in making money now, not in conserving whales for the future. If the whales become commercially extinct in the process, too bad, we shall have to invest our capital in some more obliging animal, or just go on destroying the fish stocks of the world, like any other maritime nation. The constitution of the IWC is weighted against attempts to make it conserve stocks, as it is supposed to do. The handful of non-whaling nations which have joined in the past two years – Oman, Seychelles, Sweden, Switzerland – are no match for the phalanx of whaling nations who joined last year: Chile, Korea, Peru, Spain.

The proof of the pudding is in the eating, and this pudding has been almost eaten up. Since the IWC began in 1948, it has stage-managed the commercial extinction of the blue whale, the humpback whale, the sei whale and all but the North Atlantic stocks of the fin whale. Now it is getting going on the sperm whale, for which it refused this year to bring in the moratorium that might have helped to save it, as it might have helped to save the fin and sei whales if it had been brought in after Stockholm in 1972, when the nations of the world almost unanimously – the USSR was absent – voted for a moratorium. One might have thought that the members of the IWC, who after all at the beginning were almost all making good profits out of whaling, would have objected to this seeming incompetence. But not a bit of it. They all prefer to exterminate the whales commercially and then write off their investment. This makes good sense commercially, even to a socialist country, since the USSR is one of the leading destroyers of the whale stocks of the world.

The 32nd annual meeting of the IWC, at Brighton in July 1980, distinguished itself by making a record number of anti-conservation decisions. It rejected zero quotas for the aboriginal catches of bowheads and humpbacks. It rejected once more the total commercial moratorium. It rejected a proposed three-year moratorium on sperm whales. It did not even get around to discussing a North Atlantic moratorium.

In many ways the bowhead decision was the most disgraceful of all. This is the one whale which it is generally agreed is in danger of actual as distinct from commercial extinction. Yet because Eskimos have votes and whales do not, the

United States bulldozed through a three-year quota of 65 struck or 45 landed, despite the zero quota recommended by the Scientific Committee for several years past. It also ignored the scientists' recommendations that if any whales were to be taken they should be immature ones, and did not even discuss the quite promising possibilities for substituting gray whales for bowheads. Like all fishing communities, the Eskimos are very short-sighted, and do not recognise they are overfishing until there are no more fish (or whales) to catch. Like all nations the United States is actuated primarily by self-interest.

The victories for the idea that whale stocks should be conserved for future generations were comparatively small: a few hundred minke whales in the Antarctic and sperm whales in the North Atlantic, and a few whales here and there in other parts of the oceans. The outlook for the future has some promising features (most of them due to the impending disappearance of fishable whale stocks): Peru and Chile out of whaling by 1982, Spain stopping sperm whaling now, a change of heart by Denmark and increased public pressure within Spain and Iceland. And the cold harpoon is banned for all species other than minke.

The British Government, having stood up in a white sheet at the start of the meeting and said that, just like last year, it was fully in favour of genuine whale conservation, then vitiated its stand by unduly restrictive instructions to its Commissioner. Much of the restriction was due to the financial limits that have become a mania with the present Government, but they never seemed to permit the British Commissioner to take a bold lead or speak as if he really believed in what his Government promised. This is something the British ngo's, who are now working together as a subcommittee of the new Wildlife Link, will have to attend to before next year.

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*The photograph of the humpback flukes on the previous page is reproduced from Wake of the Whale, a superb book of coffee-table dimensions with magnificent photographs (mostly in colour), by William R. Curtsinger and published by Hutchinson (£15.95). The text is an expansive running commentary to the photographs and how they were taken, by Kenneth Brower.*

## Treasure Hunters Threaten Mussels

Amateur pearl-hunters in British rivers are seriously disturbing freshwater pearl mussels *Margaritifera margaritifera* because, unlike professionals, they generally cannot tell which are likely to contain pearls (one in 300-500) and so open, and kill, them in large numbers. Professionals hunt from boats, using glass-bottomed buckets to scan the beds for likely pearl-bearers, which they pick up with long forked sticks; they open the shell only the few centimetres necessary to see if a pearl is inside and, if not, return the mussel to the river unharmed. Amateurs may walk on the beds in shallow water or dive to them in the deeper pools that were in many cases previously inaccessible and a reservoir of undisturbed breeding colonies, and they indiscriminately kill the mussels in their hundreds. Mussels have already disappeared from many rivers because of pollution or scarcity of fish, which they rely on for dispersal of their larvae; this further threat is to the few remaining healthy populations.

## Black Muntjac

Chinese zoologists have discovered that the black muntjac *Muntiacus crinifrons*, hitherto regarded as a vanishing species, occurs in four provinces of eastern China.