

Whaling and whale welfare – summary briefing

Marcela Vargas

Programmes Manager

WSPA Latin America & The Caribbean

What is WSPA?

WSPA is the world's largest federation of animal welfare societies, with over 900 member societies in more than 150 countries. With 13 offices worldwide and over 500,000 supporters around the world.

The WSPA has consultative status at both the United Nations and the Council of Europe.

What does the WSPA believe?

WSPA is an animal **welfare** organisation. We believe that:

- Animals have biologically determined instincts and needs and can experience both pain and suffering
- Animals should be permitted to live their lives free from avoidable suffering at the hands of humans
- Unnecessary animal suffering should be prevented
- Opposed to the killing of animals when it can be proven that it is inhumane – this is why we are here today and opposed to whaling
- WSPA's vision is 'a world where animal welfare matters and animal cruelty ends'. Our Mission is to work with governments, stakeholders and the public across the world to 'build a united global animal welfare movement'.

Whale facts

Before we move on to the main topic of this presentation – whales, welfare and the IWC, we start with a few facts about whales to paint a picture of their lives beneath the waves. Many scientists, governments and IWC delegates often make the mistake of thinking about whales only as 'numbers' or 'populations' and how many may be killed sustainably. Whales are of course not on 'populations' but as unique and sentient individuals, communities and societies, and require protection accordingly.

The ancestors of the whales in our oceans today first took to the seas some 50 million years ago. Whales split from primates – us – around 92 million years ago, allowing them an evolutionary lineage entirely distinct from our own. It is perhaps this fundamental degree of separation which makes their lives and existence so enigmatic to us.

Whales are quite literally the largest animals on our planet. Fin whales for example are between 6-6.5m at the time of birth and weigh up to 2,700kg. Adult whales range in size, from the small pygmy right whale which may reach 6.6 metres in length to a blue whale that can grow to over 33m in length and whose mass greatly exceeds that of the largest dinosaurs and weighing up to 180,000kg. As long lived, slow growing mammals, all whales tend to have long gestation periods, with an average of about a year but up to 14 months in some species. Some whale calves such as Minkes, reach independence from their mother at around 6 months of age but some species remain with their mothers for much longer. Humpback whale calves for example have been known to stay with their mothers for up to two years.

Whales make the longest migrations of any creature on earth, following migration routes that their ancestors likely followed long before the dawn of human science and understanding.

Living in a world dominated by sound clearly demands an entirely different set of skills for navigating, feeding, and social bonding. Whales communicate across vast expanses of oceans, some species using complex calls and 'songs' of which we have little or no understanding. The communal songs of male humpback whales evolve over months and years and whilst songs vary by oceanic region all follow the same syntactical and evolutionary rules. It is clear that many cetaceans live in co-operative societies in which they co-ordinate many of their activities, including predation, and their calls and other signals are important in this; Many scientists believe that the charismatic natural behaviors of some species, such as tail slapping and breaching, are another form of communication.

Although we know very little about the social behavior and culture in many whale species, there is evidence to suggest that many whale species are intelligent, sociable animal with strong maternal bonds especially evident.

The International Whale Commission

- The International Whaling Commission (IWC) is the international body responsible for the conservation and management of the world's whales.
- There are currently 78 member countries of the IWC.
- Representatives from these countries meet annually to debate and discuss issues surrounding whales and whaling.
- Of these 78 countries, 19 are in the Latin American/Caribbean region.

The ban on commercial whaling

Over 2 million great whales were killed in the 60 years between 1925 and 1985. The IWC failed to make whaling sustainable – let alone humane - and illegal or 'pirate' whaling was widespread. Finally, as several great whale species faced extinction, the IWC implemented a moratorium (temporary ban) on commercial whaling in 1986.

The moratorium is still in place today; however the future of the world's whales is not secure as the pro-whaling countries continue to push for the resumption of commercial whaling. In addition to this, two countries – Norway and Japan – defy the whaling ban and aim to kill up to 2,500 whales this year. Iceland is also considering resuming commercial whaling.

Whaling today

Despite the ban, industrialised whaling is still carried out by Japan and Norway. Norway lodged an official objection to the ban and continues commercial whaling. Norwegian whalers have killed over 8,000 Minke whales since the whaling ban was put in place.

Japan whales under the guise of 'scientific research' although the meat is sold to consumers in supermarkets. The Japanese government currently awards its whalers quotas for 1,415 great whales each year. The scientific credibility of this whaling has been repeatedly questioned by eminent scientists from around the world, and the Commission itself has passed over 20 Resolutions calling on Japan to stop its lethal research. The increasing escalation of 'scientific' catches by Japan is a major issue within the IWC.

Growth of membership of the IWC

There has been a huge growth in world interest in the whaling debate in recent years. Membership has risen steeply in recent years as Japan has encouraged small developing nations predominantly from the Caribbean, West African and South Pacific regions to join the IWC and vote in favour of whaling, in exchange for 'fisheries development aid'. At the same time, pro-whale protection countries have also joined to stop Japan from achieving the majority vote it needs to lift the whaling ban.

Latin America & The Caribbean at the IWC

19 members of the IWC are Latin American or Caribbean countries. 12 of those countries are considered 'anti-whaling' nations – they consistently vote in favour of initiatives to protect whales and to maintain the whaling ban.

7 of these countries are considered 'pro-whaling' nations – they vote alongside the whaling countries in favour of initiatives, which involve full or partial lifting of the moratorium in order for a resumption of commercial whaling. Several Caribbean nations, such as St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia and Antigua and Barbuda, make very forceful interventions in support of whaling. They commonly use Japan's propaganda arguments that whales are eating all the fish and therefore must be culled.

The IWC is now at a critical point in its history – we believe that now is the time to refocus on protecting whales instead of arguing about whaling.

What do whales need from the IWC?

Protection from the changing environment. Whales are now under increasing threat from human induced changes to their environment, including chemical and noise pollution, ship strikes, entanglements with fishing gear, prey depletion, increasing offshore industrial development and the escalating threats from climate change. As man continues to exploit the most remote and deepest areas of the oceans, the range and intensity of many of these threats has increased and many threats act together in complex synergies. The IWC's work to monitor these threats and the effects they have on cetacean populations is critically important. The IWC also has an important role to play in recommending mitigation to these threats.

Whales are long lived, slow breeding mammals and therefore particularly vulnerable to the effects of over exploitation. They are also wide ranging and deep diving animals making it extremely difficult to accurately monitor their numbers. Although some populations have been recovering since the whaling ban came into place, numbers are still nowhere near pre-exploitation abundance and some species, such as the western gray whale and north Atlantic right whale, are critically endangered with only a couple of hundred individual animals left.

Many members of the IWC (notably the whaling nations!) argue that the IWC does not have competency to address the welfare problems of whaling, however there is no other global body capable of oversight of this important issue.

Commercial whaling is for commercial production of meat sold on the same supermarket shelves as pork, beef or chicken. Today, few if any, countries would allow farm animals to be

slaughtered by a method with such frequent potential to cause prolonged suffering, yet whales, despite also being killed for commercial sale and human consumption fall through the 'welfare loophole' of being wild animals.

How are whales killed?

It surprises many people that the methods used to kill whales have changed little in over one hundred years. So-called 'modern whaling' – a Norwegian invention – uses the exploding penthrite grenade harpoon, which penetrates around 30cm into the head or thorax of the whale and then detonates; immediate unconsciousness is intended but not always caused. Whilst the exploding harpoon was designed for killing minke whales, today, much larger species - such as fin, sei and Bryde's whales - are killed using similar weaponry. It is clear that the effectiveness of the exploding grenade on these larger species is greatly reduced: we would not, after all, use a weapon designed for killing a chicken to kill a cow. A typical whale hunt would take place like this:

Pursuit

Even before the harpoon is fired, the whale is likely to have endured substantial physical and psychological stress after being pursued, often at considerable speed and over many miles. The stress is greater as adult whales, having no natural predators, are not adapted to such pursuits.

Aim

There are major differences between shooting terrestrial mammals and the killing of whales at sea, as during whaling both the gunner and the whale are in motion. Whales cannot be restrained prior to killing and poor visibility, bad weather and sea swells add to the problems of securing an accurate aim. Whales may appear for only 2-3 seconds to breathe in which time the whaler must take aim and fire. By the time the shot has reached the whale the most likely area of the body for impact is the abdominal area, furthest away from the brain and least likely to cause immediate unconsciousness. Even for the most experienced harpooners an assured single lethal shot is almost impossible.

Fire

The effectiveness of the explosion of the harpoon within the whale depends on where it strikes. In the many cases where the harpoon strike is not immediately lethal, massive shock and injury can instead be caused whilst the whale remains conscious.

Secondary killing methods

Whales which are not killed but wounded by the initial harpoon strike are winched towards the vessel by the harpoon line, causing additional pain and stress. When close enough they are then subjected to further harpoon shots or rifle fire.

Assessment of death

Determining death in whales is extremely difficult. Whales are physiologically adapted to dive to great depths and are able to store large amounts of oxygen. Even following significant



blood loss, they may be able to maintain consciousness for long periods and may be conscious and able to feel pain even when their physical movements have stopped. In 2004 the IWC passed a Resolution (2004-3) declaring that the current criteria for assessing death in whales (slack jaw, sinking, relaxed flippers) are 'inadequate'. Some whales may still feel pain even when they are recorded as dead and perhaps even as they are hauled aboard the vessel.



The results

Since the whaling nations have now stopped making welfare data their whale hunts available to the IWC, the welfare for the 2,500 whales that Japan and Norway plan to kill over the next year is unknown. However, the most recent data submitted by Japan and Norway highlights the poor welfare standards of whale hunts. As these data are collected by government inspectors or, in the case of Japan, the whalers themselves, they are likely to present a favourable picture of hunt welfare.

Norway stopped collecting any welfare data for their whale hunts in 2003. The most recent data collected in Norway in 2003 claimed that 1 in 5 whales did not die immediately. In **Japan** the instantaneous death rate for all species is much lower, with an average of only 40% of whales dying immediately as the harpoon explodes inside them. For those whales which do not die immediately, the average time taken

to die is between 2.5 and 3 minutes, though cases of whales taking tens of minutes to die are not uncommon.

In addition to the obvious suffering, whaling causes suffering that we can't see; in 2006 25 great whales were reported struck and injured but not landed, though the actual number is likely to be far higher as it can be difficult for whalers to assess when they may have injured an animal. This is a serious welfare concern, whales struck but not landed may have a wide range of injuries which – depending on severity – may prove fatal. Even relatively minor injuries may affect a whale's mobility or ability to feed and result in a long death of weeks or months.

A further welfare concern is that a very high proportion of female whales – up to 90% of minkes - are pregnant when killed. There is no way for whalers to assess whether a whale is pregnant and no attempts are made to protect the welfare of foetuses. Foetuses in the end stages of pregnancy have fully developed neurological systems and hence have the ability to suffer pain from the harpoon damage and/or suffer as they are starved of oxygen. Finally, many whale species are social and the impacts of killing an individual could extend to other members of the social or family group.

Whale welfare: comparisons with international welfare standards

Japan often claims that by opposing whaling on welfare grounds, countries killing other animals for meat are hypocritical. WSPA believes that this is not valid, since with appropriate

care and attention humane slaughter can be achieved in the controlled environment of an abattoir, but there is simply no humane way to kill whales at sea.

Whales killed commercially are killed for their meat which is sold on the same supermarket shelves as beef and pork, yet their welfare is systematically overlooked by both the whaling nations and the IWC. Whaling does not compare favourably with international standards for humane slaughter; in 2007 the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) produced the Terrestrial Animal Health Code including guidelines for the humane slaughter of animals. These guidelines are designed to ensure that an animal is maintained in a good state of welfare during the pre-slaughter and slaughter processes and were agreed by the Chief Veterinary Officers of the OIE's 169 member countries and territories, including Japan, Norway and Iceland.

When comparing the welfare of whales hunted and slaughtered at sea to the OIE's guidelines for humane slaughter, it becomes clear that whaling falls far short of what the OIE would consider to be acceptably humane treatment of animals. The IWC, having failed to introduce any meaningful controls to protect animal welfare during hunts, has failed to keep up with international agreed standards for animal welfare and humane slaughter.



Whale-watching: a humane alternative

The archaic and inherently inhumane practice of whaling meets the needs and interests of only a handful of countries. Conversely whale-watching – enjoyed by over 10 million people in over 90 countries worldwide and generating over US\$1.25 billion annually - is better for people and for the welfare of

whales.

The whaling nations claim that whaling and whale-watching can exist side-by-side: WSPA disagrees.

Local impacts of whaling on whale-watching

Whale-watching vessels and whalers often target the same inquisitive animals which approach boats, in the same areas close to shore, and on the same days when the weather is good and the sea is calm. It is therefore not surprising that even with relatively few whales being killed each year, there have already been several incidents in Japan, Norway and Iceland which resulted in whale-watchers witnessing a whale hunt and slaughter.

National and international impacts of whaling on whale-watching

Whaling has also been shown to have a negative impact on the general public's attitude to whale watching. Visitor surveys in Iceland suggest that the growth of whale-watching in Iceland might not have been so rapid if Iceland had resumed whaling during the late 1990s: when asked "Would it have had any effect on your decision to come to Iceland, if Iceland would resume whaling", 54% responded that it would have had a negative effect.

Furthermore, the success of whale watching clearly depends on animals being at ease with the whale-watch vessels so that they



can be seen from a reasonable distance or even so that the whales voluntarily approach the boats, allowing rewarding close encounters. Whaling presents two problems here: firstly, as highlighted above, that whalers will kill the inquisitive whales which approach both whaling and whale-watching boats; and secondly, whilst we know little about the mechanisms for cultural transmission in baleen whales, it is *possible* that a worldwide resumption of whaling - subjecting thousands of animals to frightening pursuits and slaughter of other animals in their group - could make some whale species more 'boat-shy'. As many whale species are migratory this could have global impacts – whaling operations in the South Atlantic or South Pacific could affect the success of whale-watching operations in South America.

Welfare for whale-watching

As with any human-wildlife interaction, it is vital that appropriate ethical and welfare guidelines are adhered to by the companies offering whale watching trips and the people who pay to go on them. As long as this is the case, watching marine mammals in the wild should be seen as a sustainable use of whales and an opportunity for local communities to benefit from protecting marine mammal populations.

What next for whales and the IWC?

After more than 15 years of negotiations around the moratorium and possible resumption of commercial whaling, the IWC has reached an impasse and is looking to its meeting this year to break the polarised deadlock.

WSPA believes that whaling is unacceptably inhumane and that far more people can derive far more value from watching, rather than killing whales in the 21st century.

At its 60th meeting in Chile there is a real opportunity for the IWCs members to redefine the IWC as a cetacean protection organisation, maintaining the ban and strengthening the mandate of the Commission to protect whales and develop well-managed whale-watching. The strength of the Latin American block towards this goal is of high importance.

Conclusions

- 1 Whaling is inherently cruel: this presentation has show conclusively that even with the best intentions, whalers cannot assure a humane death for hunted whales. Whilst the IWC spends the vast majority of its time debating how many whales there are and whether they could be sustainably hunted, almost no time is spent discussing the ethics of *whether* such an inherently cruel practice should be condoned in the 21st century, a time when we are increasingly protecting the welfare of other animals used by humans.
- 2 WSPA fully supports and encourages the Latin American group in the IWC in its efforts to progress the Commission's mandate for the non-lethal use of whales. It is clear that whale watching is the most economically important use of whales, and that if proper guidelines are followed it can also develop as a humane and low-impact sustainable use of these amazing animals. The IWC, as the global body with competency for whale management, should be actively developing its mandate to develop and sustainably and humanely manage whale-watching.

- 3 The IWC now has an opportunity, on its 60th birthday, to modernise itself. It must change its focus away from whaling in order both to meet the needs of coastal communities wishing to benefit from the non-lethal uses of whales, and to meet modern international standards for the treatment of animals and protection of their welfare.