



Opening Statement to the 60th Meeting of the International Whaling Commission June 2008

It is most fitting that the International Whaling Commission (IWC) should hold its 60th Meeting in the Republic of Chile. With more than 6400 kilometers of coastline, its boundaries nearly touching the South Pole, and its marine ecosystems subject to the complex influences of the Humboldt Current, Chile is blessed with extraordinary marine biodiversity. The richness of its marine life, which includes half of the world's cetacean species, and the dedication of its government and its people to the preservation of these animals, make Chile a perfect venue for discussions concerning the future of whales, and of the IWC itself.

In Chile's territorial waters we see strong signs of hope for the future of cetaceans, like the evidence of recovering humpback whale populations in the Straits of Magellan, and the magnificent discovery of the blue whale nursery in the Gulf of Corcovado, findings which call to mind Pablo Neruda's entreaty, "Let us look for secret things somewhere in the world, on the blue shore of silence." ("Hay que buscar cosas oscuras en alguna parte de la tierra, a la orilla azul del silencio).

President Michele Bachelet's recent state of the nation address, in which she proposed to ban whaling activity in Chilean waters and to create a sanctuary, has produced the most relevant political news concerning whales this year. However, political support for whale protection has made great gains elsewhere too. The Environment Council of the European Commission announced that it had reached agreement on a common position of support for the moratorium on commercial whaling. Several nations have declared or hinted at the possibility of reversing their long held pro-whaling stances. And the United States Congress, in the clearest possible way, passed House Concurrent Resolution 350, calling upon the U.S. Delegation to the IWC to maintain its firm opposition to commercial whaling in any form, and to take steps to end the killing of whales under the guise of lethal scientific research and to prevent the sale of whale meat from these hunts.

On the other side of the balance sheet, however, are disturbing developments that cast their shadow upon IWC 60. Announcements of intent to pursue a new commercial quota and a renewal of the international commercial trade in whale meat, in defiance of both IWC and CITES. A demand for increases in aboriginal subsistence whaling catch limits even as whale meat from an aboriginal subsistence hunt is being processed for commercial sale. And countries that should know better suddenly joining the chorus of alarmist prognoses for the future of the IWC itself.

Humane Society International (HSI) operates with the deep conviction that civil society strongly opposes commercial whaling of any kind, and the expectation that member governments to the IWC will honor their obligations under the Convention to protect and conserve whales for future generations. There is a multitude of environmental threats facing whales today and it would be

irresponsible of the Commission to allow even a limited resumption of coastal commercial whaling.

While the IWC is an important focus for HSI, our work to protect whales is carried out year round on other fronts. Late last year our affiliate Humane Society International-Australia, after five years of litigation, secured a historic decision from the Australian Federal Court, which confirmed that a company killing whales in the Australian Whale Sanctuary is conducting an illegal hunt in breach of Australian law.

Addressing the continuing presence of a political argument that “whales eat fish and so must be culled,” HSI commissioned a study by fisheries expert, Dr. Daniel Pauly, which exculpates whales from the groundless charge that they are eating the world’s fish and specifies the role of the industrial fishing fleets of the developed nations in ocean depletion. It is our earnest hope that this report will deflate once and for all an irresponsible argument that plays on anxieties about food security in developing nations while masking the fundamental causes of the global fisheries crisis.

Our work concerning whales this past year also included an important joint project, as we worked with other non-governmental organizations on A Time to Refocus, a blueprint for the IWC’s future, laying emphasis on its accomplishments and its potential as a cetacean conservation entity.

The IWC’s meeting in Santiago marks the third occasion on which it has convened in Latin America, but certainly not the last. Latin American nations now comprise nearly 20% of its members, and their commitment to the future of whales could not be stronger. When it comes to whale watching tourism, Latin America has perhaps the greatest promise of any region in the world. And Chile’s recognition of whaling as part of its cultural and historical heritage, at Quintay and elsewhere, shows that it is possible to transcend such a legacy with a demeanor of respect, while embracing the ethical and practical principles of a modern worldview that has come to privilege preservation over the global fisheries paradigm that gave birth to the IWC. Chile gave up whaling nearly thirty years ago, and while whaling is acknowledged as a part of its national history, whale watching is the focus of its future.

Like the Republic of Chile itself, the whale nations have endured -- and survived -- the vagaries of a tumultuous twentieth century, one that decimated their populations throughout the world. Now, as they do every year, concerned citizens from nations throughout the globe turn their attention to the proceedings of the IWC, the international body in whose hands the fate of the world’s whales rests. Like a shining beacon setting a true course to shore, Chile’s commitment not to hunt commercially or for scientific purposes, and its dedication to the principle of sanctuary, lights the way for all.

On the web at www.hsi.org