



environmental
investigation
agency

OCEAN

January 2026

THE INTERNATIONAL BAN ON COMMERCIAL WHALING AT 40

Four decades of protecting whales, dolphins
and porpoises under the International Whaling
Commission

A personal reflection by EIA co-founder Jennifer Lonsdale



INTRODUCTION

This year the 80-year-old [International Whaling Commission \(IWC\)](#) celebrates the 40th anniversary of the implementation of one of the world's most important conservation and welfare decisions. The international ban on commercial whaling, commonly known as the moratorium, was adopted in 1982 and implemented in 1986.

An estimated 2.9 million whales were killed during the 20th century, devastating global great whale populations and using inherently cruel methods. Some estimates indicate that total biomass of large whales was [reduced to less than 20 per cent of pre-commercial whaling levels](#).

The moratorium has saved the lives of millions of whales and whale populations are gradually beginning to recover from the brink of extinction. This despite Japan, Norway and Iceland ignoring the moratorium and using loopholes in the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling (ICRW) to continue commercial whaling. The moratorium does not apply to [Aboriginal Subsistence Whaling](#) and the IWC monitors and issues catch limits for these hunts.

In response to the IWC's action on commercial whaling, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) has banned international commercial trade in the products of whale species listed on the treaty's Appendix I. Iceland, Japan and Norway took reservations to several of the CITES Appendix I whale listings, enabling them to trade in whale meat of certain species with other nations holding the same reservation or with non-parties to CITES.

EIA's history and development have been intertwined with the IWC and this is also true of my life. Living in landlocked Uganda for my first 11 years, I went to the beach only about three times. I only knew about whales, dolphins and porpoises (collectively known as cetaceans) from books, but I always loved them.

As a teenager in the late 1960s, I was listening to a BBC radio news story about industrial commercial whaling. I was horrified to learn about the wanton slaughter of whale populations around the world and my reaction was "Someone has to tell them to stop whaling!".

 Above: Jennifer Lonsdale at IWC68 in Slovenia, 2022





THE EARLY DAYS

In 1982, the moratorium was adopted and the IWC and great whales entered a time of momentous change.



In 1977, I was living in San Francisco when I discovered Greenpeace and signed up as a volunteer. Here were people bringing global attention to the plight of great whales.

Courageous Greenpeace activists were confronting Russian whalers in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, driving small inflatable dinghies between the harpoons and the whales being targeted. The Greenpeace Rainbow Warrior was doing the same against Icelandic and Spanish whalers.

Whalers were infuriated because they could not afford to accidentally injure or kill the protestors interfering while they harpooned the whales and had to stop.

Watching from cliffs near San Francisco, I saw my first whales. Gray whales were migrating between the Arctic and the Baja California peninsula and the Gulf of California. The joy of seeing these mesmerising animals swimming so gloriously free in the wild was tainted by the great sadness of knowing that so many whales were being gruesomely killed every year.

Film and photographs of Greenpeace's audacious interferences were being seen around the world and global opposition to commercial whaling was growing.

In 1981, [the non-exploding \(cold\) harpoon was banned by the IWC](#) because it was designed to wound and secure whales and not to kill them. In 1982, [the moratorium was adopted](#) and the IWC and great whales entered a time of momentous change. This was a result of intense campaigning and lobbying by NGOs and scientists, including Allan Thornton, a founder of Greenpeace UK and subsequently a co-founder of EIA.

I met Allan during his visit to the San Francisco office of Greenpeace. He had masterminded the purchase of the Rainbow Warrior and its early campaigns, including against commercial whaling. We met up again when we had left Greenpeace and were living in London, and Allan proposed we did some work together.

Above, EIA founders, from left, Dave Currey, Jennifer Lonsdale and Allan Thornton in the mid-1980s



OWNING A NORTH SEA TRAWLER AND DOCUMENTING NORWEGIAN WHALING

Over a cup of tea in 1983, Allan suggested we purchase a vessel and sail to northern Norway to document Norwegian whaling.

Norway had not replaced the cold harpoon with the exploding harpoon and had lodged an objection to the moratorium, which meant that under the IWC rules it could ignore the ban on commercial whaling.

Neither of us had any money, nor did we work through a formal organisation. Within a few days, however, a very determined Allan had raised funds, bought a boat and was looking for crew! Having never aspired to owning a boat, it was quite surreal that we now owned a North Sea trawler, which we named the *Balaenoptera*.

In June 1983 we set sail for Norway with the aim of documenting the Norwegian whale hunt and it changed my life for good.

The *Balaenoptera* trip resulted in unique film and photos of Norwegian whaling being broadcast around the world. Pressure was on and Norway's whaling quotas were cut by two-thirds and the country finally replaced the cold harpoon with the explosive version. A small group of determined people aboard a rust bucket trawler had already made a big impact.

It was dreadful seeing a minke whale being killed. The entrails were dumped at sea and we brought them aboard. I helped our vet with her postmortem as she studied the heart, lungs, liver, kidneys, womb and intestines. The whale had birthed at least one calf and looked to be in good health before she was so cruelly killed. You simply cannot imagine the size of these animals until you're up so close. It was an extraordinary moment and I found it very moving to understand more about her.



THE FAROE ISLANDS PILOT WHALE HUNT

Aboard the *Balaenoptera* was wildlife photographer Dave Currey. A year later, Allan persuaded Dave and I to travel to the Faroe Islands to investigate its pilot whale hunts. At the time it was the world's largest whale hunt, with about 2,000 whales killed each year, but received virtually no international attention.

With some trepidation we drove to the Faroes in Dave's VW campervan, a journey that included two ferries. Our [month-long trip](#) led to Allan, Dave and I founding EIA in September 1984. Our plan was to investigate the exploitation of small whales, dolphins and porpoises (small cetaceans) as these species were not protected by the global moratorium on commercial whaling.

EIA returned to the Faroes numerous times and documented several hunts, broadcasting the footage around the world and putting enormous pressure on the Faroese Government. I studied our film and photos of the killing methods and submitted papers to the IWC's Working Group on Whale Killing Methods. More pressure was brought to bear with the passing of a resolution by the European Parliament.

The numbers killed were reduced and the worst of the cruelty eliminated, although sadly the hunt continued.

In 1981, the Danish Government submitted a scientific permit to the IWC Scientific Committee for its consideration. The permit allowed up to nine fin whales a year to be taken by the Faroe Islands for 'research' for an indefinite period of time. The permit was not endorsed by the Committee. From 1981-84, 13 fin whales were killed. I was told that the permit was withdrawn and no fin whales were taken after 1984 due to the increasing pressure on the Faroes as a result of EIA's campaign against the pilot whale hunt.

 This page and opposite: pilot whale hunting in the Faroe Islands





 Above: Dall's porpoises in the wild
Above, right: landed and butchered in Japan

MY FIRST IWC MEETING

We never gave up on small cetaceans. In the late 1980s, Japan was reportedly killing up to 40,000 Dall's porpoises a year – an increase from the annual kill of about 10,000.



I attended my first IWC Annual Meeting with Dave in 1987 to bring attention to the pilot whale hunt. The moratorium had been in place for a year and commercial whaling dominated the discussions.

Our briefing persuaded John Gummer, then the UK Secretary of State for the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, to include a very critical statement on the Faroese pilot whale hunt in his address to the meeting.

The meeting was confusing but I was quickly learning how the IWC worked and what could be achieved by working with its member governments. Attending these meetings became my normality and over the years EIA has played a significant leadership role in developing networks and coalitions with other NGOs to coordinate and strengthen our collaboration with the IWC and its member governments to best effect.

We never gave up on small cetaceans. In the late 1980s, Japan was reportedly killing up to 40,000 Dall's porpoises a year – an increase from the annual kill of about 10,000.

EIA carried out investigations in Japan and reported the results to the 1990 IWC meeting, where we successfully called for a resolution that included a request for Japan to reduce the numbers of Dall's porpoises being killed. We were on edge as the vote took place and the resolution was adopted with Japan abstaining. This was first ever IWC resolution on a small cetacean species.

Despite the IWC Scientific Committee Sub-Committee on Small Cetaceans having studied them since the 1970s, many IWC members claimed the IWC did not have the competency to address small cetacean issues. This victory set the precedent and, since then, numerous small cetacean resolutions have been adopted, including on pilot whales, belugas and narwhals, striped dolphins hunted in Japan and critically endangered species such as the vaquita and freshwater cetaceans. Several were drafted by EIA.

At the IWC's Annual Meeting in 1994, the Small Cetaceans Fund was set up, with EIA making the inaugural donation of \$5,000. [The IWC's amazing work to study threats to small cetaceans](#) and implement conservation measures has expanded considerably since that time.





ENVIRONMENTAL THREATS

Just four years after the moratorium was implemented, Iceland, Japan and Norway were pressuring the IWC to allow some IWC-endorsed commercial whaling, claiming whale populations were increasing.

Scientific knowledge of threats to the marine environment and its cetacean inhabitants was increasing, including from climate change, ozone depletion, chemical and noise pollution, vessel strikes and habitat degradation. And, of course, the number one threat to cetaceans and many other marine animals – bycatch in fishing nets, which was killing hundreds of thousands of cetaceans each year.

EIA argued that the IWC could not calculate sustainable whale catch limits unless reliable data could demonstrate the long-term collective impact of these

environmental threats on cetacean populations and the marine environment. By 1993, the study of these threats became a permanent agenda item for the IWC Scientific Committee and Commission meetings. We funded the first IWC workshop on pollution and years later were told by scientists that this was a vital turning point for the IWC's work on the impact of pollution on cetaceans.

Over time, this body of work has, quite rightly, become the main business of the IWC, which is no longer all about setting whale hunting quotas.

Today the moratorium remains in place and the majority of the IWC's work is focused on studying and developing mitigating strategies to tackle global threats to cetaceans. It is highly respected and works in partnership with numerous Inter-Governmental Organisations (IGOs) and the United Nations. [The IWC website](#) reports fascinating information on this remarkable work.



WELFARE

Killing cetaceans is inherently cruel.

The harpooner stands on a moving platform (the boat) firing at a moving target (the whale). It is impossible to guarantee that the harpoon will cause instantaneous loss of consciousness and death by hitting a vital organ. Many whales suffer prolonged excruciating pain before they die, which contradicts accepted animal welfare standards in whaling countries such as Iceland and Norway.

In 2005, EIA and the World Society for the Protection of Animals (now World Animal Protection) filmed a Norwegian minke whale hunt uninterrupted from the moment the boat started following a minke whale through to its harpooning and until the whale died. It took at least 14 minutes and 28 seconds from the moment the harpoon struck until its final breath.

I carried out frame by frame analysis of the killing process, which revealed that in addition to the whale and the vessel moving forward, the vessel was also rising and falling. This resulted in the whale being struck

in the abdomen and not the head. As the whale was drawn towards the vessel in difficult sea conditions, it swam under the vessel and the line was caught. The hunter fired seven rifle shots before one finally hit with sufficient velocity to penetrate and kill the whale.

I submitted and presented a paper on this hunt on behalf of the UK Government to the 2006 IWC Workshop on Whale Killing Methods. I am very proud that it provided vital evidence of the inherent cruelty of whaling as a result of the unpredictable elements in play during a hunt. I am also pleased that the Norwegian Government agreed with my analysis and conclusions.

Cetaceans are also subjected to untold suffering by a range of threats including but not limited to chemical and noise pollution, entanglement in fishing nets, collisions with vessels and whale watching.

The IWC has evolved to address the welfare implications of these threats with this unique work being overseen by the Working Group on Whale Killing Methods and Welfare Issues.



RELENTLESS PRESSURE ON THE MORATORIUM

For four decades, Iceland, Japan and Norway have maintained relentless pressure on the IWC to lift the ban on commercial whaling.

In early January 1995, the IWC held a meeting in Reine – a whaling town in cold, dark stunning northern Norway. There was less than an hour of twilight. We were there to launch discussions on the Revised Management Scheme (RMS), a whaling management plan that should be in place if it was agreed to resume commercial whaling in the future. This had the support not only of certain 'anti-whaling' governments but also some NGOs!

We were warmly welcomed by the local people, went for a short cruise on a whaling boat and visited a fish factory. It was interesting but very little progress was made. For a decade, negotiations on the RMS took place and I attended almost every single meeting. Agreement was impossible because EIA and a number of other small NGOs fought consistently to ensure that any management scheme would be water-tight and would not automatically result in the lifting of the moratorium.

At the 2006 IWC meeting it was agreed to abandon negotiations. This was a victory for whales and the precious moratorium. Since then, whaling countries, in particular Japan, have submitted several proposals to overturn the moratorium, but so far these have all failed.

南 友 丸 純 一 十 五 第 五 十 一 純 友 丸 南 友 丸

 Above, left: fin whale landed in Iceland
Above, right: Japanese whalers return to port with a dead minke whale in Japan





CONCLUSION

The evolution of the IWC has been hard work but very much worth it.

As our scientific knowledge has increased, the IWC has a new portfolio of work on [climate change](#), [ecosystems and cetaceans](#). Its Scientific Committee is working to explore the ecosystems services that whales provide to coastal and pelagic waters and the atmosphere. This includes how they trap and store carbon, help in the distribution of nutrients and how this benefits the entire food chain.

Economists have estimated the huge monetary value of these keystone species live in their natural environment, dubbing them "[nature's solution to climate change](#)".

I attended 28 annual and then biennial Commission meetings and numerous sub-committees in many countries with so many people from around the world. As the IWC's work has evolved, so too has its technology. In my early meetings there was no internet, mobile phones or computers – everything was on paper and postal-based. The IWC Secretariat's offices had huge printers – if a document was amended on the floor, we had to wait for the new version to be printed and distributed before discussions could resume.

Today, IWC meetings are paper-free, saving untold numbers of trees and printer cartridges. The IWC website is a treasure trove of historical and present day documents. Its entire history is in the archives.

And while IWC member governments continue to disagree on many things, work gets done and the one thing on which everyone agrees is that the IWC Secretariat staff are the jewel in the crown of the organisation.

It has been a privilege to work with so many people from around the world on IWC matters. Friendships were made with people we didn't agree with, as well as with those whom we share a passion for protecting cetaceans.

I was overwhelmed to receive an OBE for my work to protect the environment, particularly cetaceans, and the prestigious Animal Welfare Institute's [Schweitzer Medal](#). I feel these awards are not just for me but received on behalf of so many who work so hard to ensure a future for cetaceans, so vital for generations to come.

I am particularly proud of the four decades of EIA staff whose determination has contributed so much to the evolution and success of the IWC.

The great whales are a keystone species and just by being alive and travelling the vast ocean they are benefiting myriads of ecosystems and species, including us.

We must allow them to continue their slow recovery in peace and the magnificent moratorium and the IWC must remain in perpetuity.



