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IWC AT 80

Building on the 40-year moratorium on commercial whaling to strengthen the conservation and protection of all cetaceans

EIA briefing to the 70th meeting of the International Whaling Commission
Hobart, Australia, 27 September – 3 October, 2026

INTRODUCTION

The International Whaling Commission (IWC) was established under the 1946 International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling (ICRW) and observes its 80th anniversary this year. Notably, 2026 also marks 40 years since the global commercial whaling moratorium came into effect.

The whaling moratorium remains one of the most effective international conservation measures in history. It has enabled many whale populations around the world to begin to recover from the large-scale commercial and sometimes illegal hunting that took place in the second half of the 20th century. In parallel, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) banned international trade in large whales, which has helped curtail demand for these vulnerable species.

Nonetheless, Iceland, Japan and Norway continue to hunt whales, defying both the IWC moratorium and the CITES Appendix 1 listing and have killed more than 50,000 whales since implementation of the moratorium.

Despite the lower number of whales being hunted, a lack of demand for whale products, even in the main market of Japan, is forcing a continual decline in commercial whaling operations.

In addition to unacceptable cruelty and sustainability concerns, there is no economic justification for continued commercial whaling. Of 2,700 tonnes of Icelandic fin whale meat exported to Japan in 2023, half remained in storage as of April 2026.¹ In desperation, Iceland's lone whaling company is seeking to justify the killing of fin whales for a new and unproven market for iron supplements, while in Japan a large range of whale pet food products are increasingly available.² Meanwhile, Kyodo Senpaku is requesting the Government of Japan to increase subsidies for whaling and intends to double the volume of whale meat used in school lunches.³

EIA wholeheartedly welcomes the recent announcement from the Government of Iceland that it intends to comprehensively revise its current Whaling Act, which could include a permanent ban on whaling.⁴

The world's cetaceans face a dramatic rise in threats resulting from human activities, including fisheries, climate change, pollution and vessel strikes as well as from directed hunts.



In the past four decades, the IWC has evolved into the global authority on cetacean conservation. In 2018, it adopted Resolution 2018-5, the Florianópolis Declaration, which agreed that the role of the IWC in the 21st century includes the responsibility to "... ensure the recovery of cetacean populations to their pre-industrial levels" and reaffirmed the importance of maintaining the moratorium, recognising the cumulative effects of multiple, existing and emerging threats to cetacean populations.

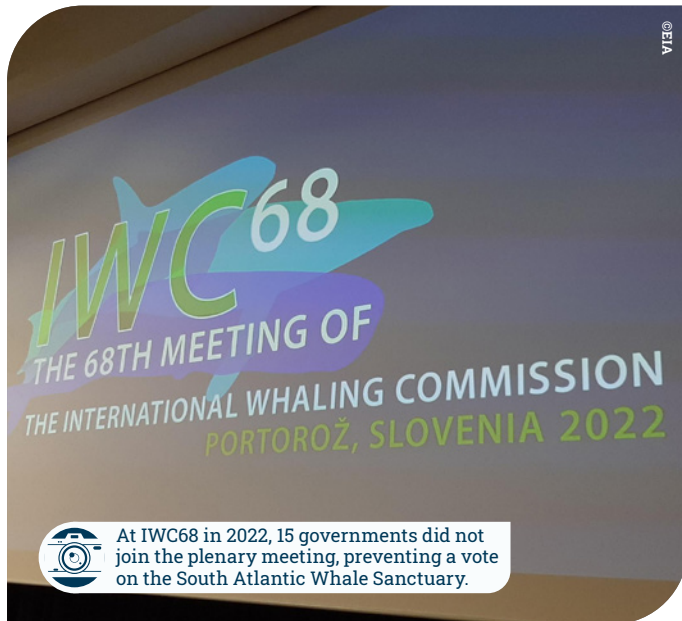
In the same year, the IWC also adopted resolutions on ghost gear entanglement, noise pollution and the role of cetaceans in functioning ecosystems.⁵ Subsequent meetings in 2022 and 2024 saw the adoption of resolutions on marine plastic pollution, cooperation in Antarctica and synergies with the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and their relevant agreements.⁶

Modern non-whaling threats now account for far more mortality of large whales than whaling. Expertise provided through the IWC's Scientific and Conservation committees inform on all cetacean conservation issues that have emerged since the commercial whaling ban, recognising the need for improved management of these many and cumulative non-whaling threats.

At IWC70, EIA encourages Contracting Governments to build on this mandate through the adoption of decisions and Resolutions aimed at strengthening the conservation and protection of all cetaceans.



PRIORITIES FOR IWC70



AGENDA ITEM 3: QUORUM

At IWC69, the IWC tasked the Working Group on Operational Effectiveness (WGOE) to propose revisions to the Rules of Procedure concerning quorum to provide clarity to enable effective decision-making.

The report of the WGOE (FA/70/04.1/01) contains two proposals broadly based on the effective approach taken by the Acting Chair at IWC69.⁷ The key difference between the two proposals is that Proposal 1 is based on full membership, i.e. all ICRW Contracting Governments, while Proposal 2 is based upon those Contracting Governments that are registered, credentialed and attending the meeting. The WGOE agreed that the Commission should exhaust all efforts to reach a consensus regarding the function of the Commission, including its quorum rule, but noted that if consensus cannot be reached then a vote may be taken.

WGOE Proposal 2, which defines quorum as a simple majority of members having delegations at the meeting, will encourage participation in IWC meetings and incentivise members to ensure their credentials are valid. It also renders the IWC less susceptible to tactics aimed at deliberately breaking quorum, as have been used in the past to prevent the adoption of the South Atlantic Whale Sanctuary.⁸

If consensus on one proposal is not reached, it will be important to ensure there is clarity on how decision-making on the two alternative proposals from the WGOE will be conducted; specifically, that voting will be undertaken on both proposals and the proposal with the higher number of votes adopted.

RECOMMENDATION: Support WGOE Proposal 2 and ensure, in the absence of a consensus, that both proposals are voted on.

AGENDA ITEM 7: PROPOSALS TO AMEND THE SCHEDULE – SOUTH ATLANTIC WHALE SANCTUARY

Many large whale populations are showing strong signs of recovery since the implementation of the moratorium, while others, such as Antarctic blue whales which were reduced to historic low levels of about one per cent of pre-exploitation abundance, remain Critically Endangered.⁹ South Atlantic right whales recovered from near extinction following historical exploitation in the 18th and 19th centuries, but now face a climate-driven reproduction decline.¹⁰ Sanctuaries are an important additional layer of protection that can benefit cetaceans and other marine wildlife, protect critical habitat and stimulate research and awareness on marine biodiversity issues.

Adoption of the South Atlantic Whale Sanctuary (SAWS) is expected to benefit cetaceans and to bring multiple benefits to range states.¹¹ The proposal aims to “promote the biodiversity, conservation and non-lethal utilisation of whales in the South Atlantic Ocean”. The SAWS encompasses critical breeding grounds, feeding areas and migratory passages for more than 51 cetacean species, including blue, fin, sei, humpback, southern right, minke, pygmy right, Bryde’s and sperm whales.

Its designation will assist with the recovery of cetacean populations and help build support for increased technical and financial capacity. The proposal for a whale sanctuary in the South Atlantic has been tabled since 1998 but failed to obtain the necessary three-quarter majority vote.

RECOMMENDATION: Support the proposal of a Schedule Amendment to create a South Atlantic Whale Sanctuary.



AGENDA ITEM 8: PROPOSED RESOLUTIONS

Six resolutions have been proposed for discussion and negotiation at IWC70, most of which further the IWC's conservation mandate and strengthen its links and cooperation with international bodies and organisations, thus deserving full support. These are summarised, with recommendations, below.

8.1 RESOLUTION ON THE GLOBAL TRADE IN FISH MAW AND INCIDENTAL CATCHES OF THREATENED CETACEANS

The trade in fish swim bladders ('maw') is a growing threat to multiple cetacean species. Maws from teleost fishes in the Sciaenidae family (croakers and drums), as well as several other species, have become high-value commodities in global trade, primarily driven by consumer demand in Asian markets.¹² Like shark fin, and sometimes in place of shark fin, fish maw is prized as a luxury food and investment and for its purported health benefits. Maws from croakers are among the most highly valued due to their larger size and high collagen content.¹³

The tragic impact of this trade on the world's most endangered marine mammal – the vaquita porpoise – is well documented. Bycatch of vaquita in illegal totoaba

gillnets set to catch totoaba for their maws, which are highly prized on international markets, has reduced the population to just a few animals.¹⁴

Other endangered and vulnerable species at risk include Indo-Pacific finless porpoises (*Neophocaena phocaenoides*), narrow-ridged finless porpoises (*N. asiaeorientalis*), Irrawaddy dolphins (*Orcaella brevirostris*), Australian snubfin dolphins (*O. heinsohni*), Indo-Pacific humpback dolphins (*Sousa chinensis*), Australian humpback dolphins (*S. sahulensis*), Indian Ocean humpback dolphins (*S. plumbea*) and franciscanas (*Pontoporia blainvillei*).¹⁵

There is an urgent need to tackle this emerging and poorly reported issue and prevent other threatened cetacean populations following in the wake of the vaquita. Ireland, on behalf of EU countries which are members of the Commission,¹⁶ has submitted a Resolution which directs increased collaboration with CMS and CITES and encourages further assessments of cetacean bycatch in maw fisheries impacts in order to develop recommendations on measures to prevent bycatch.¹⁷

RECOMMENDATION: Support Resolution on Global Trade in Fish Maw and Incidental Catches of Threatened Cetaceans (IWC/70/08/01).



8.2 RESOLUTION ON VESSEL STRIKES

In recent decades, there has been rapid increase in shipping, other maritime traffic and vessel speeds, leading to a rise in both noise pollution and ship strikes. As a result, mortality and injuries of cetaceans from ship strikes have become an important conservation issue, with the majority of incidents involving large cetaceans. For example, vessel strikes are a critical threat to endangered North Atlantic right whales (*Eubalaena glacialis*), significantly contribute to their elevated mortality.¹⁸

The IWC has done extensive work in this field, setting in motion a global initiative to collect and analyse information about reported vessel strikes in 2007, developing a Strategic Plan to Mitigate the Impacts of Ship Strikes on Cetacean Populations,¹⁹ establishing a multi-disciplinary multi-stakeholder expert panel in 2023²⁰ and collaborating with the International Maritime Organization (IMO), IUCN and the World Shipping Council (WSC), among others.²¹

A draft resolution on Vessel Strikes, submitted by Ireland on behalf of EU countries which are members of the Commission, acknowledges the IWC's efforts to collect, analyse and share information on reported vessel strikes, including through its Global Vessel Strikes Database, identifies specific areas of the Strategic Plan to advance and directs the IWC Secretariat to explore ways to increase collaboration and cooperation with relevant stakeholders.²²

RECOMMENDATION: Support Resolution on Vessel Strikes (IWC/70/08/02).

8.3 RESOLUTION ON SMALL CETACEAN DIRECTED TAKES LINKED TO COMMERCIAL FISHERIES

A draft resolution submitted by Switzerland on "Small Cetacean Directed Takes Linked to Commercial Fisheries", recognises the expanding global scale of legal and illegal directed takes of small cetaceans, in which tens of thousands of individuals are killed annually, and draws attention to the transition from unintentional bycatch to assisted bycatch and targeted hunting of small cetaceans – including for use as bait in fisheries.

Recognising the need for robust data, management and engagement, the Resolution requests the Scientific Committee to prioritise providing scientific advice on small cetacean species and populations subject to exploitation in fisheries, including for use as bait, and directs the Conservation Committee to develop and implement Conservation Management Plans where needed.²³

RECOMMENDATION: Support Resolution on Small Cetacean Directed Takes Linked to Commercial Fisheries (IWC/70/08/03).

8.4 RESOLUTION ON CETACEAN STRANDINGS AS A CROSS-CUTTING PRIORITY OF THE IWC

Cetaceans are widely recognised as vital sentinel species for monitoring ocean health as they are long-lived mammals feeding at high trophic levels.²⁴

The IWC Strandings Initiative, launched in 2016, is a flagship example of how the IWC delivers tangible conservation and welfare outcomes through science, technical support, capacity-building and international cooperation. The Initiative has established a global network of experts providing real-time emergency support during stranding events, delivered best-practice training and guidance to responders worldwide, strengthened regional capacity through programmes reaching more than 110 participants across eight Caribbean nations and advanced efforts to develop coordinated strandings data systems that can identify emerging threats to cetaceans and inform conservation action.²⁵

Cetacean strandings are a cross-cutting concern that intersects with animal welfare, conservation and scientific research. Strandings can provide valuable information about cetacean biology and their environment and the continuation and expansion of this work should be a priority for the IWC. Increasing both financial and in-kind support from Contracting Governments would enable the Initiative to expand its proven model, strengthen global preparedness and response and to deliver benefits across multiple areas of the Commission's work.

Ireland, on behalf of the EU countries that are members of the Commission, has submitted a Resolution on Cetacean Strandings as a Cross-Cutting Priority of the IWC which requests continued IWC Secretariat support to the Strandings Initiative and encourages Contracting Governments to provide financial and in-kind support to sustain and strengthen the work.²⁶

RECOMMENDATION: Support Resolution on Cetacean Strandings as a Cross-Cutting Priority of the IWC (IWC/70/08/04).

8.5 HOBART DECLARATION ON THE EIGHTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF THE SIGNING OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION ON THE REGULATION OF WHALING, 1946

To commemorate the 80th anniversary of the signing of the ICRW, the current Chair and Vice-Chair of the IWC have submitted a declaration to be put forward at IWC70. The declaration commits to maintaining the Commission as "the world's leading legal and authoritative body for matters relating to the management and conservation of whales and cetaceans", confirms that addressing non-whaling related threats to cetaceans are relevant to all Contracting Governments and calls upon Contracting Governments to "build on the achievements of the past eighty years by continuing their collective commitment towards the management and conservation of whales

and other cetaceans for the benefit of present and future generations."²⁷

EIA appreciates the efforts of the Chair and Vice-Chair to bridge the different priorities and positions across Contracting Governments and to focus on strategic priorities and shares the hope that it can be adopted by consensus with some minor additions.

The declaration generally reflects a clear forward-looking approach which can help build consensus; however, the absence of the well-established welfare remit of the IWC, in addition to its conservation and management remit, is problematic. Moreover, the acknowledgement of the Revised Management Procedure (RMP) as a "robust, practical and precautionary mechanisms to set sustainable catch limits of whales" is quite irrelevant, given the moratorium on commercial whaling which has been in place for half of the entire life of the IWC. At a minimum, reference to the RMP should not be included without clearly stating that the Commission has agreed that all aspects of the Revised Management Scheme would need to be fully incorporated into the Schedule before the RMP is implemented.²⁸

RECOMMENDATION: Support the Hobart Declaration on the Eightieth Anniversary of the Signing of the International Convention on the Regulation of Whaling, 1946 (IWC/70/08/05) with amendments to (a) include the welfare remit of the IWC in both preambular and operative paragraphs and (b) either remove reference to the RMP or include a clear linkage to the fact that the IWC has agreed that unless all aspects of the RMS are incorporated into the Schedule, the RMP should not be implemented.

8.6 RESOLUTION FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A CONSERVATION AND MANAGEMENT PROGRAM FOR WHALE STOCKS AIMED TOWARDS THE SUSTAINABLE USE OF WHALE RESOURCES

At IWC69 in 2024, the Commission adopted Resolution 2024-3 on Responsibilities related to commercial whaling activities. This acknowledged and supported the continued need for the moratorium "to enable whale populations to fully recover, and to support the proper functioning of marine ecosystems" and "as a precautionary response to the growing threats to cetaceans from direct and indirect human activities".

The draft Resolution submitted by Antigua and Barbuda, with support from Palau, St Kitts and Nevis, St Lucia and Togo is aimed at reviving discussions on the Revised Management Procedure (RMP) and Revised Management Scheme (RMS), which together would form the basis for IWC-sanctioned commercial whaling and the lifting of the moratorium.²⁹

EIA agrees with the concern expressed by the co-sponsors that "significant commercial whaling activities" are being undertaken "outside of the management authority of the IWC". However, the countries carrying out commercial whaling have demonstrated no interest in IWC oversight of their whaling operations. Indeed, they



do not fulfil even the current limited reporting obligations (e.g. on welfare data). Rather than reward decades of intransigence by Iceland, Japan and Norway, with significant cost to the IWC (a cost of £97,140 is estimated to set up the special task force requested),³⁰ EIA urges the co-sponsors to withdraw their resolution and focus their efforts on persuading Iceland, Japan and Norway to abide by the IWC's moratorium on commercial whaling.

EIA also urges Contracting Governments to use the agenda item to highlight the success of the 40-year-old moratorium on commercial whaling and raise concern that ongoing commercial whaling by Iceland, Japan and Norway, which together have killed more than 45,000 whales since 1986, is undermining the IWC and the moratorium on commercial whaling.

RECOMMENDATION: Reject the draft Resolution for the Implementation of a Conservation and Management Program for Whale Stocks aimed towards the Sustainable Use of Whale Resources (IWC/70/08/06).





AGENDA ITEM 11: WHALE KILLING METHODS AND WELFARE ISSUES

In 1983, the Commission established the Working Group on Humane Killing, which agreed a comprehensive Action Plan.³¹ In 1999, it was renamed 'Working Group on Whale Killing Methods and Associated Welfare Issues' (WKMWI) and in 2014 the Commission agreed an updated Action Plan covering the full scope of work, including reducing the suffering experienced by cetaceans which have stranded or are entangled in fishing gear.³²

The IWC defines "Humane Killing" as "Death brought about without pain, stress, or distress perceptible to the animal."³³ Through the ICRW Schedule,³⁴ multiple resolutions and the Action Plan, Contracting Governments are required or requested to supply various data from observations of whaling operations which can help to ensure that the pain and suffering of cetaceans is understood and minimised.

IWC Resolution 1999-1 encouraged the development of more accurate indicators for determining time to death (TTD) and requested submission on relevant information such as:

- number of whales killed by each method
- number and proportion of total whales killed instantaneously
- time to death for each animal not killed instantly
- number of whales targeted and missed
- number of whales struck and lost
- calibre of rifle, where used, and how many bullets used
- methods used to determine unconsciousness/time of death.

A Summary Reporting Form based on relevant Commission Resolutions (1997-1, 1999-1, 2001-2 and 2004-3) has been developed to help Contracting Governments provide the necessary information requested, including on times to death and methods used to euthanise stranded or trapped whales.³⁵ Despite this, the remaining commercial whaling countries which are members of the IWC, namely Iceland and Norway, routinely fail to submit relevant data to the IWC which enables an assessment of welfare standards in their respective commercial hunts.

In the absence of data provided by the whaling countries, NGOs provided recent monitoring data and analysis to the Whale Killing Methods and Welfare Issues Working Group meeting that clearly shows there are significant serious welfare concerns in both hunts.³⁶ An independent expert assessment of video footage of 16 Norwegian minke whale hunts provided by the Endangered Species Protection Agency (ESPA) documented an average Time to Death (TTD) of 3m 51s and an Instantaneous Death Rate (IDR) of only 25 per cent, significantly lower than Norway's previous reports which date back to the 2011-12 whaling season which claimed an IDR of 82 per cent.³⁷

With respect to Iceland's fin whale hunt, TTD and other data from national monitoring (MAST) and NAMMCO obtained by Icelandic NGOs show that the IDR fell from 84 per cent in 2014 to 59 per cent in 2022, while the average TTD of those animals not killed 'instantaneously' increased over the same period, from eight to 11.5 minutes.³⁸

Despite the apparent worsening welfare conditions for minke and fin whales hunted by Iceland and Norway, neither country reports welfare data requested by the IWC to the WKMWI Working Group and both countries have reduced national monitoring of the hunts.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE IWC:

1. Urge Iceland and Norway to implement full coverage, independent monitoring of all commercial whaling operations
2. Urge Iceland and Norway to collect and submit up-to-date comprehensive data on TTD and other welfare related data as requested in IWC Resolution 1991-1.
3. Urge all Contracting Governments to:
 - use the Summary Reporting Form to provide data to the IWC
 - engage fully with the WKMWI to establish better criteria for determining the onset of irreversible insensibility and death in whales and reduce times to death and other associated welfare issues
 - support the Voluntary Welfare Fund, to enable the IWC to progress the assessment and mitigation of non-hunting threats to cetacean welfare.

FOR QUESTIONS OR FURTHER INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:

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