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# A Sanctuary for Whales: Protecting marine biodiversity through the International Whaling Commission

## Introduction

For the world's whales, dolphins and porpoises (collectively known as cetaceans), 2018 is a critical year. The 67<sup>th</sup> meeting of the International Whaling Commission (IWC67) takes place in Brazil in September, where important proposals will be discussed with far-reaching consequences for the conservation of cetaceans.

This briefing outlines several issues of concern regarding the global status of whales, dolphins and porpoises, and offers steps that can be taken to address them through the IWC.

Whales face grave and growing threats from the degradation of marine habitats. Thirty years after the IWC implemented the moratorium on commercial whaling – an agreement that saved many great whale populations from certain extinction – human activities now pose an unprecedented challenge to their survival. The IWC is the only global organisation with a mandate for the conservation and management of whales. Its work is increasingly focused on understanding and

addressing human threats such as climate change, chemical, plastic and noise pollution and entanglement in fishing gear.

A range of issues will be discussed at IWC67, from hunting quotas to whale sanctuaries. Given the unparalleled threats cetaceans now face, there has never been a more important time for IWC members to provide the Commission with a strong mandate to continue and build upon its important conservation work.

Supporting conservation measures in the IWC is consistent with, and could help achieve, other targets and treaties. These include Sustainable Development Goal 14 on Life Below Water, the Memorandum of Understanding on Western African Aquatic Mammals under the Conservation of Migratory Species, UNEP Regional Seas Programmes and National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans agreed under the Convention on Biological Diversity.

## The International Whaling Commission: From whalers' club to conservation body

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, 2.9 million whales were killed by the whaling industry, likely the largest removal of any animal in terms of total biomass in human history<sup>1</sup>. Whale populations were devastated, with sperm whales reduced to about 30 per cent of their pre-whaling population and blue whales by up to 90 per cent<sup>2</sup>.

The IWC was set up in 1946<sup>3</sup>. Initially a whalers' club, it continued to sanction the growing and unsustainable commercial whaling industry for several decades. Population after population was depleted, some completely eradicated. All efforts to sustainably manage commercial whaling failed and in 1982, as global pressure to end the mass slaughter mounted, the IWC enforced a moratorium on commercial whaling from 1986.

Undoubtedly, the moratorium saved several whale species from extinction and has allowed some populations to recover. But more than three decades

later, the great whales and their cousins – dolphins and porpoises – are still facing grave and growing threats from a range of human activities.

Over the past two decades, the IWC has increasingly turned its attention to these threats and now addresses a variety of conservation and welfare issues, from bycatch, marine plastic and noise pollution to responsible whale-watching<sup>4</sup>.

The IWC currently has 89 contracting governments from around the world. Commission meetings are held every two years to progress agreed workplans, make decisions and, as necessary, vote on proposals submitted in advance. A simple majority (more than 50 per cent) is required for resolutions and a three-quarter majority to make changes to the IWC's legally binding Schedule – for example, to establish new whale sanctuaries or whaling catch limits.

### Some examples of IWC conservation actions

- 1966: Banned the hunting of blue and humpback whales globally
- 1976: Banned the hunting of fin whales in the Southern Hemisphere
- 1979: Banned factory ship whaling (other than minke whales) and established Indian Ocean Sanctuary
- 1982: Agreed to a moratorium on commercial whaling
- 1986: Moratorium on commercial whaling came into force
- 1993: Adopted its first resolution on whale watching
- 1994: Established the Southern Ocean Sanctuary
- 1995: Scientific Committee held a special workshop on climate change
- 1996: Scientific Committee held a special workshop on chemical pollution leading to comprehensive research programme Pollution 2000, 2000+ and 2020
- 1996: Established the Standing Working Group on Environmental Concerns
- 1998: Established the Whale Watching Sub-Committee under the Scientific Committee
- 2003: Established the Conservation Committee
- 2004: Held a symposium to consider the issue of anthropogenic noise pollution
- 2005: Established the Ship Strike Working Group
- 2008: Introduced Conservation Management Plans to rebuild vulnerable cetacean populations
- 2010: Endorsed the first Conservation Management Plan (Western North Pacific gray whales)
- 2011: Established the Global Whale Entanglement Response Network
- 2011: Whaling Watching Working Group produced a five year plan
- 2012: Held a workshop on interactions between marine renewable projects and cetaceans
- 2013: First workshop on impacts of marine plastic pollution on cetaceans
- 2014: Adopted an Animal Welfare Action Plan
- 2014: Scientific Committee established a Climate Change Steering Group
- 2014: Pollution project undertook work to assess toxicity of microplastics in cetaceans
- 2016: Endorsed first Conservation Management Plan for a small cetacean (franciscana dolphin)
- 2016: Adopted resolution acknowledging the ecosystem services cetaceans provide
- 2016: Established the IWC Bycatch Initiative
- 2016: Began work to establish a Strandings Network to collect data and develop guidelines

## Increasingly at risk: Why we must resave the whale

The 1986 moratorium on commercial whaling has enabled several populations to recover from the brink of extinction. However, full recovery will be slow, with some whale species unlikely to reach half of their pre-hunting numbers by 2100<sup>5</sup>. As long-lived creatures with low reproductive rates, whales are particularly vulnerable to over-hunting. Blue whales can live more than 100 years and sperm whale mothers often care for their calves for over a decade<sup>6</sup>. The migratory nature of whales further complicates conservation efforts.

In addition, the moratorium has been consistently undermined by three countries – Japan, Norway and Iceland – that have continued commercial whaling despite the global ban<sup>7</sup>. About 37,000 whales have been killed by these three countries since 1986<sup>8</sup>.

As well as commercial hunting, whales face unprecedented and increasing impacts on the marine environment caused by human activities<sup>9</sup>. Entanglement and bycatch in fisheries gear is the primary direct risk to whales, dolphins and porpoises, killing more than 300,000 each year<sup>10</sup>. Climate change poses one of the greatest threats through ocean acidification, melting ice sheets, changes in ocean temperatures and food chain disruption<sup>11</sup>. Marine debris, particularly plastic pollution, is now widely recognised as another pressing threat to marine biodiversity. Other deadly forms of pollution include chemical, noise and that associated with oil production. Several whale

species remain highly endangered and extremely vulnerable to non-hunting threats such as ship strikes and entanglement, including the North Atlantic right whale, which faces possible extinction<sup>12</sup>.

These issues present an enormous conservation challenge and the moratorium plays a critical role in minimising additional pressure on whale populations through hunting.

The IWC has made a significant contribution to the scientific understanding of the impacts of human activities on cetacean populations, developing guidelines and coordinating actions to address these risks. Important initiatives include the Pollution 2000 (and thereafter 2000+ and 2020) programme – a comprehensive research programme initially focused on toxic chemicals that has evolved to address a wide range of pollutants. The IWC's Small Cetaceans Voluntary Fund has funded over 15 research and conservation projects which carry out important work across the globe. The ship strikes database gathers data to build an understanding of where and why collisions occur with ships. The IWC's Global Entanglement Response Network has delivered training to more than 500 representatives from over 20 countries.

These examples show how far the IWC has come from its original function as a whaler's club and demonstrate its ability to help tackle the 21<sup>st</sup> century threats to the world's whales, dolphins and porpoises.

## The South Atlantic Whale Sanctuary

For many years, a number of countries – most recently Argentina, Brazil, Gabon, South Africa and Uruguay – have proposed an IWC sanctuary in the South Atlantic<sup>13</sup>. The proposed South Atlantic Whale Sanctuary (SAWS) stretches from the equator to the border of the current Southern Ocean Sanctuary, encompassing critical breeding grounds, feeding sites and migratory passages for more than 50 cetacean species. The SAWS was first discussed by the IWC in 1998 but has never achieved the 75 per cent vote required for its establishment. It is due to be discussed and voted on at IWC67 in September 2018.

The SAWS proposal contains a Management Plan, providing a framework to coordinate regional conservation initiatives, scientific research and responsible whale-watching. A proposed research programme covers a comprehensive range of 21<sup>st</sup> century threats, including climate change and pollution.

Adoption of the SAWS is expected to bring multiple benefits to range states and those near its boundaries.

As an added layer of protection, the SAWS can help enhance recovery of whale populations exploited in the South Atlantic – over 31,000 large whales were landed in Angola and Gabon between 1909-59<sup>14</sup>. As a major wildlife attraction, whales and dolphins can boost

### Key benefits of the SAWS

- Provides a framework to coordinate conservation initiatives such as reducing fishing gear entanglements and addressing illegal killing of cetaceans
- Encourages collaborative research to boost scientific capacity and regional marine knowledge
- Supports whale-watching and ecotourism growth contributing to sustainable development
- Raises awareness, enhancing the region's status as a marine biodiversity destination
- Complementary to, and helps fulfil, existing marine biodiversity targets
- Offers potential for technical and financial capacity to help meet these goals.

coastal economies, with many West African countries showing great potential for further ecotourism growth including responsible whale and dolphin watching. The proposed awareness-raising activities included in the Management Plan could further improve the region's profile as a marine biodiversity destination.

The adoption of SAWS and its Management Plan would also complement and help achieve goals and commitments under other international fora, including the Sustainable Development Goals, Convention on Biological Diversity and UN Regional Seas programmes.

## Recommendations for IWC67

**This September, the biennial meeting of the IWC (IWC67) will be held in Brazil. As the primary global body with a mandate to conserve and protect whales, dolphins and porpoises, the IWC must continue to expand and prioritise actions to mitigate the severe degradation of the marine environment threatening the survival of these magnificent ocean giants. The position taken by West African IWC members is critical in ensuring the IWC can take bold steps to meet these challenges.**

**We encourage IWC members to:**

- **support the establishment of the South Atlantic Whale Sanctuary;**
- **actively support development of the IWC's work to address conservation and welfare concerns including bycatch, marine plastic pollution, climate change and noise pollution;**
- **reject proposals that undermine the moratorium on commercial whaling, such as proposals for commercial whaling quotas.**

Environmental Investigation Agency, Bénin Ecotourism Concern, Nature Tropicale ONG, ULB Cooperation, Biodiversité et Cultures du Bénin (BCB), The Development Institute, Agbo-Zegue ONG

**E:** [clareperry@eia-international.org](mailto:clareperry@eia-international.org)  
[eia-international.org](http://eia-international.org)

Environmental Investigation Agency (UK) Ltd. Company Number: 7752350 VAT Number: 440569842. Registered in England and Wales

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