

# Environmental Investigation Agency Opening Statement: IWC69

## September 2024

Representatives of the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) thank the Government of Peru for hosting the 69<sup>th</sup> meeting of the International Whaling Commission (IWC) in Lima. We welcome the Chair Amadou Teliel Diallo and vice-Chair Nick Gales to their first meeting in these roles and wish them well for the four-year term ahead, as well as Scientific Committee Chair Lindsay Porter. We also welcome Executive Secretary Martha Rojas Urrego and thank the Secretariat and Members of the Bureau for organising this important meeting. We look forward to a successful meeting that will contribute to improving the conservation status of cetaceans around the world.

The IWC, as the only global body with a mandate for the management and conservation of whales, plays a unique role and, while initially focused on commercial whaling, has increasingly turned its attention to other human activities which pose grave and growing threats to cetaceans. It now addresses a wide range of conservation and welfare issues, including climate change, contaminants, entanglement and bycatch, vessel strikes, anthropogenic noise, marine plastic pollution as well as the valuable role that cetaceans play in ecosystem functioning.

Key issues discussed at IWC69 will determine the operational effectiveness and the future of the Commission. This is an important time for IWC Contracting Governments to provide the Commission with a strong mandate to continue and build upon its important cetacean conservation work. Like many other observers to the IWC, we strongly disagree with a recent comment in *Nature* suggesting that the IWC has fulfilled its role and should be dismantled. There remains much work to be done. We draw IWC contracting governments attention to a joint NGO response to the *Nature* comment, *The International Whaling Commission remains vitally important to the conservation and management of cetaceans*.<sup>i</sup>

### Commercial whaling

Despite the moratorium, more than 44,000 whales (as of August 2024) have been killed since 1986, through provisions in the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling (ICRW) that permit “scientific” whaling, whaling under objection and whaling under reservation and as a non-member of the IWC.<sup>ii</sup>

Recent commercial whaling events underpin the need for the IWC and its contracting governments to take stronger action to ensure compliance with the moratorium. We draw attention to a new briefing produced by EIA and a number of other observers to the IWC.<sup>iii</sup> In our view, it is time for commercial whaling to end and for contracting

governments to the IWC to reaffirm the moratorium's vital role in the conservation of all cetaceans by adopting the Resolution on the International Legal Obligations in Commercial Whaling, proposed to this meeting by the European Union and rejecting Resolutions that undermine the conservation of whales, dolphins and porpoises.

### **South Atlantic Whale Sanctuary**

The IWC, as the only global body with a mandate for the management and conservation of whales, offers an important forum for countries bordering the South Atlantic to realise the positive benefits that further whale conservation could bring to the region.

The SAWS stretches from the equator to the border of the current Southern Ocean Sanctuary, encompassing critical breeding grounds, feeding areas and migratory passages for more than 51 cetacean species such as blue, fin, sei, humpback, southern right, minke whales, pygmy right whales, Bryde's and sperm whales. Adoption of the SAWS is expected to benefit cetaceans and to bring multiple benefits to range states and those near its boundaries by recovering, maintaining or increasing cetacean populations.

EIA was appalled at the actions of some Contracting Governments at IWC68, which exited the meeting in order to prevent a discussion and vote on the proposal, despite its submission being fully in line with the Rules of Procedure of the IWC. EIA has produced a briefing<sup>iv</sup> on the issue. We encourage all IWC members to support open and transparent discussion of the proposal, to adopt the South Atlantic Whale Sanctuary and further support the IWC's work to address anthropogenic pressures on cetaceans, including in the South Atlantic, such as climate change, bycatch and marine plastic pollution.

### **Directed hunts**

EIA is concerned about the escalation in directed hunts of vulnerable small cetacean populations globally. The Scientific Committee has raised clear concerns about directed hunts, particularly regarding the imminent risk of extirpation of three populations of narwhals in southeast Greenland if catches continue.

The SC reiterated previous advice from NAMMCO to set zero quotas, recognising the gravity of the situation. EIA recently published a review of small cetacean hunts in Greenland<sup>v</sup> and determined that robust management is required for all hunts, to include accurate reporting and consideration for additional causes of mortality. EIA strongly urges the IWC to maintain its focus to address the impact of direct hunts on small cetaceans in Greenland and globally.

## Vaquita

The Scientific Committee has reiterated previous concerns regarding the critically endangered vaquita, that numbers fewer than 10 porpoises, due to entanglement in static gillnets in the Gulf of California, Mexico.

Only 12 per cent of the vaquitas' 2015 distribution is currently protected.<sup>vi</sup> EIA welcomes ongoing efforts to survey the full range of vaquita habitat and supports the Scientific Committee's recommendation that recent legislation be urgently and fully implemented in Mexico and to rigorously progress the development of alternative fishing gear that will not entangle vaquitas and will provide sustainable livelihoods for the communities in this region.

Illegal fishing of protected totoaba fish in Mexico's Gulf of California and their subsequent trafficking and retail as part of transnational organised crime are responsible for the rapid decline of vaquitas. EIA's latest investigation, *On Borrowed Time* reveals that the market in China for dried totoaba swim bladders, or maw, on popular social media channels remains active.

The Scientific Committee strongly encourages all totoaba consumer and transit states to take all actions, as authorised under national laws and international conventions, to strive to eliminate demand, prevent imports/exports, and otherwise enforce all laws to stop the illegal trade of totoaba, and thus contribute to protection of the vaquita.

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<sup>i</sup> NGO response to Nature comment available online at: <https://eia-international.org/blog/is-the-international-whaling-commission-iwc-a-zombie-organisation-that-should-be-disbanded/>

<sup>ii</sup> IWC (2024a). Total catches since the moratorium came into place in 1985. Available [here](#). Total catches between the 1985/86 whaling season and 2023 are: Japan – 24,586; Iceland – 2,040; and Norway – 16,924. In addition, as of 26 August 2024, Japan has killed 48 Bryde's whales, 1 sei whale and 4 fin whales, while Norway has killed 413 minke whales.

<sup>iii</sup> <https://eia-international.org/report/end-commercial-whaling/>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://eia-international.org/report/south-atlantic-whale-sanctuary/>

<sup>v</sup> Dolman, S.J. et al. (2024). A review of small cetacean hunts in Greenland. *Marine Policy*, 70, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2024.106401>. Available online [here](#).

<sup>vi</sup> Rojas-Bracho, L. et al. (2024). Mexico must save the vaquita from gill nets. *Science*, 385. Available online [here](#).