



ANIMAL WELFARE INSTITUTE

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The Animal Welfare Institute thanks the people of Sorrento and the Italian government for the kind welcome to their lovely land on the occasion of the 56th meeting of the International Whaling Commission.

As one of the longest-running non-governmental organization observer to these annual meetings, we take on the responsibility of longevity to use this opening statement to mention uncomfortable truths.

As an international treaty organization able to tally the views of its members and make independent decisions concerning whales and whaling, the IWC is dysfunctional.

By allowing the continuation of blatant recruitment and funding of new delegations to the IWC by a single government and its fishing interests in order to win a majority, the Commission and its members have abandoned the system of one country, one vote. Deprived of this essential underpinning of democratic decision-making, the Commission is now thrown open to control by the country with the most money and influence to spend.

Over time, the decisions made by a Commission so corrupted will have less to do with either the conservation of whales or the orderly management of whaling and more to do with whatever is seen to most benefit the policies of one country. The fact that other countries are also involved in similar efforts of “financial diplomacy”, for example in assembling a coalition for the war in Iraq, not only fails to legitimize the process but exposes its general lack of global support.

We also are seeing another form of corruption in the undue influence of national military, oil and gas exploration, and research industries on the policies of individual countries.

Extensive peer-reviewed scientific studies show that the use of active sonar and seismic devices to look for enemy vessels or petroleum deposits employs levels of intense sound easily capable of killing whales, dolphins and fisheries over a wide area. Countries who were once staunch defenders of whales within this body, including the United States, Australia and the UK, have switched their concern to protecting the economic interests that use these devices. After a decade of whale strandings following military and seismic events, the US government is currently considering *raising* the allowable level of sound that can be legally discharged, and offering this elevated level as the model for the world.

We are also especially concerned about the potential impact of oil and gas development off Sakhalin Island on the “critically endangered” population of the remaining 100 Western Gray Whales.

It now appears that the most severe threats facing cetaceans in our oceans are the prevalence of toxic substances, the proliferation of sound pollution, indiscriminate forms of fishing, and the lack of will within the IWC and other organizations to control rampant corruption. In this light, one can envision a time when enough countries are brought into the IWC to overturn the moratorium on commercial whaling, just in time for the realization that the whales are so shell-shocked and toxic as to be unfit for consumption. In this scenario, all parties lose, especially the whales.

The traditional dialogue within the IWC concerning catch quotas and directed takes has been subsumed by these new and growing threats. All modern research indicates that our oceans and fisheries are collapsing from neglect, waste and over-consumption. And yet, it appears that the IWC is increasingly unable to make reasoned judgments concerning what course would most benefit both the creatures and people of the world.

Is the International Whaling Commission content to be reduced to just an annual excuse for whalers, administrators and whale savers alike to gather and share drinks and meals in yet another beautiful place, or will it keep a pivotal role in weighing the global demands placed upon the lives of cetaceans? The future relevance of this body hangs in the balance.