

## Guest editorial

### Whither Whaling?

In 1972 the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment called for a ten year moratorium on commercial whaling. The International Whaling Commission (IWC, then made up of 14 member governments) did not accept this resolution, taking the view that regulation by species and stocks was the more practical method of whale conservation. In the following years it reduced catches, introduced a new management procedure, and embarked on an international decade of cetacean research.

Ten years later, because of problems in the management process and uncertainty over the status of stocks, the 37 members then present in the IWC's 1982 Annual Meeting voted by a three-quarters majority to set catch limits for commercial whaling to zero from the 1986 season. By 1990, at the latest, the Commission would also undertake a comprehensive assessment of the effects of the decision on whale stocks and consider modification and the establishment of other catch limits.

Now, a further ten years on, where do we stand? The increased membership of the IWC has meant that there are a substantial number of countries involved which have a strongly conservationist policy. There is a determination to prevent repetition of past mistakes in the management of whaling. Before any resumption of commercial whaling can be contemplated these governments will need to be satisfied that, at the very least, the scientific assessments are accurate, the monitoring of stocks reliable, and the reporting of the catching operations verifiable.

The IWC Scientific Committee has undertaken a major in-depth assessment of the most important whale stocks, and the development of a revised management procedure. The latter has been designed and tested using computer simulations to ensure that stocks will not be depleted below some chosen level by whaling; to provide stability of catch limits, desirable for the orderly development of the industry; and to make possible the highest possible continuing yield. All this work has taken more time than originally envisaged, so that the 1990 deadline has come and gone.

The three-quarters of a million minke whales in the Antarctic, as well as those in the North Atlantic, should be able to sustain modest catches. The Scientific Committee will be putting forward the revised management procedure at this summer's IWC meeting, tailored to meet the stated requirements of the Commission. It will be up to the member states to decide if they feel satisfied by the scientific evidence, taken in conjunction with concerns over the humaneness of the killing process, and the increasingly expressed view that whales have a value which is as great if not greater from non-consumptive use. Prospective whaling nations will no doubt consider their role in the IWC in the light of the decisions made at this year's meeting — Iceland has already notified its withdrawal. The future of commercial whaling is close to being decided.

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