

Some more politic

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The 1984 International Whaling Commission meeting approaches and, as has often been the case in the past, there may be some surprises in store. Conservationists await with particular concern the stand that the Member nations take as the moratorium on commercial whaling draws nearer. The author has been a consultant on whales and whaling to many international organisations, including the UN Environment Programme, WWF, Greenpeace, IUCN, International Fund for Animal Welfare, as well as to ffPS. He has been since 1979 Scientific Adviser, and since 1983 Alternate Commissioner, to the delegation of the Republic of Seychelles to the IWC. He has followed the proceedings of the IWC since 1958, mainly as Representative of the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the UN. Here he is writing in his personal capacity, and what he has written should not be taken as representing the position of the Seychelles Government or of any organisation with which he has been associated.

While most conservationists have a common policy regarding whaling, they have many differences of detail, tactics and philosophy. Some feel that 'aboriginal/subsistence' whaling should have special consideration; others do not. Some regard whaling as morally repugnant while others

would draw a line between advocating the cessation or suspension of whaling on conservation grounds and advocating it on ethical grounds. Even with respect to conservation some are worried only about the possibilities of species or perhaps population extinction; others believe that whaling should stop at least until populations have recovered to numbers that might thereafter sustain high continuing catches. The World Conservation Strategy is less than helpful; it says in one place that living resources must be exploited sustainably (much quoted recently by the Japanese whaling industry and Government!) and elsewhere that there should be a moratorium on commercial whaling until certain conditions are fulfilled.

Arguments about whether policies pursued by conservation organisations and governments within the International Whaling Commission (IWC) are correct or not will no doubt continue for years. A particular issue is the adherence of new Members since 1979, most of them not whaling nations, which has been encouraged by certain governments—on both sides—and by some conservationists. That most of these new Members are developing countries, whose governments are worried about the past and continuing misuse of a common resource, adds a new political dimension to the debate and, as I hope to demonstrate, a very important one with regard to tactics as well as strategy for conservation.

In the April 1983 issue of *Oryx* Mr Richard Fitter concluded a debate with me under the title 'IWC and horse-trading' and in doing so made predictions. In 1982 the IWC had decided for a moratorium starting in 1985/86, and Mr Fitter wrote

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that this had been a 'mistake . . . to go all out for an unenforceable victory in three years' time at the expense of actual and more easily enforceable quotas today'. He said that the whaling nations that objected to the decision (Japan, USSR, Norway and Peru) might leave the Commission. He wondered whether some of the 'more impecunious Members' would still be there in 1986. And he thought that if a Conservative Government was re-elected in mid-1983 there was little likelihood even that the UK would stay in the Commission. Perhaps it is worth reviewing the situation as the 1984 IWC meeting approaches (in June, in Buenos Aires), and even making a few more predictions.

Mr Fitter not only asked some undoubtedly pertinent questions, but was clearly expressing the concern of a number of conservationists. It is timely to re-examine this matter. In my letter to which Mr Fitter was responding, published in the same issue of *Oryx* (and which was written many months before publication) I wrote that some whaling countries had lodged objections to the 1982 decision and 'they are no doubt now trying to persuade the others to do so'. They did try, very hard, and they failed. They failed because conservationist governments and active non-governmental organisations worked to dissuade the Republic of Korea, Chile, Brazil and Iceland from objecting. They were helped in this by movements within each of those countries.

Of the whaling nations in the IWC, Spain voted for the moratorium and Peru, at a dramatic moment during the 1983 meeting, withdrew its previous objection. This withdrawal was brought about by the exploitation of a scandal concerning the relationship of the Japanese-backed industry

there with the Government, by the pressures brought to bear by other South and Central American states, by the doubts raised in the IWC Scientific Committee about the supposedly satisfactory state of the stock of Bryde's whales being exploited from Peru, and ultimately by the intervention of a level of government higher than the Fisheries Ministry.

None of the hard core of whalers left—Japan, Norway and USSR—shows any signs of walking out of the IWC. Jamaica, which participated only once in a meeting, with an effective personal voice but no significant role, has announced its intention to withdraw, having been put under pressure to do so by Japan. Two countries have since joined—Mauritius and Finland. Mrs Thatcher's UK is still an active Member. The whaling countries, and the non-whalers with clear policies, want the IWC to stay in existence. The countries that have difficulty in staying in are those in which government is most divided over the whaling issue—Canada a few years ago and now, it is rumoured, South Africa. In these countries public opinion appeared to be moving slowly but steadily in favour of conservation and staying might lead to the embarrassment of switching a vote from a vehement 'no' through a hesitant 'abstain' to a somewhat shamefaced 'yes'. Australia, however, showed a few years ago that a definitive change in policy can be effected in a very dignified and constructive way. We could conceivably expect such a change in Norway.

As to the payment of dues, it is instructive to look at the list of Financial Contributions Outstanding as at November 1983. Three whaling nations owe, between them, £37,000. Of this, £22,000 is

owed by Peru, which, it came out last year, had had an offer from the Japanese whaling industry to pay its debts. On the other hand, £56,000 are owed by six non-whalers, of which £17,000 are owed by Jamaica (which like Peru has not paid since it joined) and £3500 by Mauritius, which joined only in mid-June 1983 and did not participate in the 1983 meeting. Not much evidence there that conservationists as a group in the IWC will lose because many of them are impecunious. A much more serious threat comes from the fact that Peru, which should not have been permitted to vote at the 1983 meeting on grounds of non-payment, was permitted to do so because her Commissioner challenged the constitutionality of the rule. It might now be possible for countries, by not paying, to jeopardise the budget, and eventually the existence, of the Commission.

Another dramatic event of the 1983 meeting was the debate on the catch limit for minke whales in the north-east Atlantic. This Norwegian fishery is conducted by a considerable number of rather small but well-equipped vessels which take the meat off at sea and discard the carcasses. This is thus a pelagic and highly mobile operation and the boats have gone further and further afield for their catches as local coastal whale populations have declined as a result of the fishery. Some of the minke meat has been consumed within Norway and in recent years much has been exported to Japan.

The catch was for many years set at 1790 animals. This was simply the past average catch, chosen on the basis that there was no satisfactory scientific assessment of this stock and on the assumption that the stock had not been declining under this whaling pressure. The Norwegian scientists said year after year that they could detect no decline in the usual index of whale abundance—the catch per unit effort (cpue), though several members of the IWC Scientific Committee pointed out that during the period the sizes and efficiencies of the boats had greatly increased and that this would be expected to obscure any decline in cpue. During 1982 an independent study by the International Institute for Environment and Development threw further doubt on the assumption of stability. The results were leaked at an intermediate stage; the Norwegian scientists were upset by this and caused a

big public commotion within Norway which spilled over to the international scientific community, and led those responsible for the study not to present it in full to the 1982 IWC meeting but rather to press the Norwegians to verify and amplify the results themselves.

In the midst of this the 1982 meeting could not agree on a catch limit. The scientists suggested a limit of 1690 (a revised figure for the previous average catch) and some of them advised caution; the Technical Committee favoured caution expressed by way of a 10 per cent 'safety factor' and hence advised 1521; in the Plenary session Norway tried, with the help of other Nordic countries, to get back to 1690 and failed; the most favoured proposal was a Seychelles compromise of 1606 (5 per cent 'safety factor'), but even that failed to attract the required three-quarters majority. Norway then gave the Commission an assurance that, in the absence of a catch limit, its catches would not exceed 1690. That number is being taken this year (1983).

The Norwegian scientists brought their new analyses to the 1983 meeting. They showed that there had indeed been a great increase in vessel efficiency, hiding a stock decline, and that if the stock was to be maintained at the same level only a little over 600 whales should be taken. The Norwegian delegation in the Commission itself tried to get a limit set at 885, 40 per cent higher than the number advised by the scientists as an interim measure. Norway was supported this time not only by the other whaling countries and the Nordic allies but by other EEC countries. It turned out that this was because delicate fisheries negotiations were in progress among them. An attempt by the Commission chairman to achieve a consensus in favour of the Norwegian proposal was only defeated by a group of the new countries calling for a public vote, which led to victory for science-based conservation—a limit of 635 for 1984.

With this as an example of the political reality in the IWC, it is not reasonable to argue that rather than seek the delayed moratorium in 1982 we should have worked for reduced quotas today. These are not alternatives, and never have been. The central argument for the moratorium was—and is—the continuing uncertainty about the

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state of all stocks that are still exploited, and the realisation that we tend always to be too optimistic about them. When there is good evidence that stocks are depleted, and we can carry the necessary votes both of the new and the old non-whaling Members, then we can get quotas reduced and the decisions will probably stick. It is important that the scientists did not in 1983 calculate the consequences of their new assessment as far as the state of the north-east Atlantic minke stock is concerned. If it had turned out to be less than about 60 per cent of its original number the catch limit would have been reduced to zero under the current management procedure of the IWC. Casual examination of the assessment and the catch data suggest that the stock will be, at the end of 1984, well below 'Protection' level. The Scientific Committee is to examine this at its 1984 meeting, and it will be interesting to see whether the Norwegian delegation at the political level will seek to evade the IWC rules. Norway has repeatedly emphasised its support of the principle of regulating catches in accordance with the best available scientific evidence—especially when that evidence would affect the catches of other whaling countries that were not geographically and politically close!

Outsiders will also be watching closely to see whether the Norwegian scientists will be permitted to complete their analyses and to present their results to their colleagues if those results are unfavourable to the Norwegian whaling industry. Since the July 1983 meeting those scientists have been attacked by sections of the local press, being practically accused of treachery. To their credit they have stood up to these accusations and have been publicly and courageously supported by their Director.

Perhaps in anticipation of a debacle at the 1984 meeting, the Norwegian Fisheries Ministry has been extremely active in recent months looking for another way to keep the industry going in the face of growing scientific evidence that it should cease. It is faced also with effective boycotts, organised by a number of non-governmental organisations, against Norwegian fish products, in the USA and in some EEC countries.

The favoured tactic that is emerging is to claim that certain kinds of commercial whaling are not

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really commercial and so should not be covered by the moratorium. The idea being floated is that commercial whaling is not commercial if no export of products is involved, if it is conducted by relatively small vessels, if only minke and smaller species are caught, and if the operators are dependent mainly on fishing for their livelihoods. Norwegian whalers are now saying that their activities are akin to those of Eskimo hunters who take, under special IWC provisions, about 20 bowhead whales each year using hand-held harpoons and shoulder guns and tiny boats. Strangely, this absurd idea, having been taken up by the Government, is apparently finding favour elsewhere, notably in the US. Japan also says that whaling has a long tradition there, and that there is a socioeconomic dependence on the industry by several coastal communities, but this claim can clearly not apply to Japan's sperm and Bryde's whale catching operations. Evidently, the Japanese would want to get in with any 'special considerations', as might the whalers in some of the countries that did not object, such as Iceland and Brazil, so a supplementary idea is circulating. This is that whale stocks cannot really be depleted by land station operations (or by boats with limited range, as is the Norwegian case), provided that there are catch limits. In this view such operations are, if continued, potentially much less dangerous to the resource than the operation of large factory ships with their associated fleets of catcher boats, which are now restricted to the minke whaling in the Antarctic by Japan and the USSR. Such a view is contrary to experience. In the early days of 'modern' whaling—that is, whaling with mounted cannons—Norwegian land stations destroyed stock after stock of rorquals around the world. This was, of course, before the age of the IWC and quotas. Much more recently, and under 'regulation', the Bryde's whale stock off Peru and the fin whale stock off Spain have been depleted by land station operations. Sperm whales in the North Atlantic were depleted mainly by very 'primitive' operations in the Azores.

If any case were to be made for the continuation of some kinds of commercial whaling it might be better made for the Antarctic minke whaling. Apart from the north-east Atlantic minke stock we have been discussing—which is probably

depleted to 'Protection' status anyway—the only stocks currently exploited for which we have reasonably good estimates of present abundance, are some of the southern hemisphere minke. And it is known, from surveys of unprecedented extent, that they number in the hundreds of thousands. Furthermore, there are international observers on the big pelagic operations but on few of the land station operations, and not at all on the Norwegian small pelagic operations, which, by the very nature of their size, are not amenable to such surveillance. The Soviet and Japanese claim, that no harm could come from some continuing catching, looks on the face of it reasonable. Surely, one might ask, some catching could be allowed, especially as it has not yet been shown that any of these southern stocks are depleted to below their levels of maximum productivity?

The trouble is that we have absolutely no idea what is a safe level of catch—that is, one that would not lead to further reduction in population size, at least until the status of these stocks has been determined by further research. Until 1982 the Scientific Committee believed these stocks to have been increasing as a result of there being more food available to them since the larger species were depleted. It is now agreed there is no valid evidence for such a supposition. The Committee has not yet estimated what might be the consequence of the new view as regards the status of the stocks in those sectors of the Southern Ocean that have been intensely exploited for the past 12 years, particularly those in the Indian Ocean sector from which most of the catches were taken in the early phase of Antarctic minke whaling, and where stocks might already be near to, if not yet at, 'Protection' levels.

The scientists also have no firm idea about what might be the maximum or average net reproduction rate of the minke whale, or, indeed, of any other rorqual. At the 1983 meeting various members of the Scientific Committee offered a guessed range for minke of from four to less than one per cent. There is really no evidence that it is not considerably less than one per cent, nor that the appropriate threshold for 'Protection' status is

not much higher than the current 60 per cent assumption.

In this situation there is no rational alternative to the moratorium decision, whether whales are considered as worth saving for their own sakes or as 'resources' for us. My prediction is that Norway will soon abide by that decision—although in doing so it is likely, as is its custom, to make a declaration of its special interpretation of the meaning of 'commercial whaling'—and that Japan and the USSR will do likewise. But I wouldn't put much money on the order of the last two. There are too many possible scenarios. For example, suppose Japan continued its land station operations, leaving the USSR to continue in the Antarctic? Japan might be quite content, as at present, to buy all the Soviet meat production, and there would be nothing to prevent the USSR from taking the entire Southern hemisphere catch limit, whatever it is for the 1984/85 season. There have been more surprises than that in the history of the IWC. We might know more about the options by the time this article is printed.

Meanwhile, we do have a problem in the efforts to bring order into whaling, and this is within our own ranks.

Some people, and a few conservation organisations, have begun to say things like, 'Now we have "saved the whales" we can turn our attention elsewhere'. It is important to realise that a large part of the critical scientific data analyses on which the case for reduced quotas, and eventually the commercial moratorium, is increasingly based, have been conducted by independent scientists using funds provided by non-governmental organisations—some of which are not generally thought of as supporters of research. It will be necessary to maintain such research for at least two more years.

I do not much like using military metaphors, but one in this case is apt: we have won a battle but have not yet won the war. I have tried to show how some of our opponents are regrouping their diminished forces. This is not a time to relax vigilance.

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