

Whaling and the Sustainable Development Goals

Whaling and the commercial whaling ban

Despite a 1986 moratorium (ban) on commercial whaling, agreed by the International Whaling Commission (IWC) in 1982, commercial whaling still continues by Iceland, Norway and Japan. These countries have lodged formal objections or reservations to the moratorium, or in the case of Japan, who categorise their whaling as scientific research, also known as 'special permit whaling'¹. Aboriginal Subsistence Whaling is also carried out by a small number of countries and this is allowed provided that they meet a certain criteria and that catch quotas are approved by the IWC. Where commercial whaling takes place, demand for whale meat is typically low, particularly amongst younger generations and there is evidence of some whaling nations stock-piling whale meat due to the current low market demand. However, as the moratorium was agreed on the understanding that it would be a temporary measure to allow whale populations to recover from the over-exploitation of previous decades, there are repeated calls from the whaling nations to now lift the ban and allow commercial whaling to resume with the blessing of the international community. Strong resistance from governments and civil society who wish to protect whales from any further hunting activities has so far managed to fend off these efforts to overturn the whaling ban. On-going discussions within the IWC have so far failed to resolve this impasse.

In the 30 plus years since the moratorium was put in place, the IWC has been able to focus more of its attention on the myriad of other threats that whales face in the modern world and has evolved an essential body of experts equipped to monitor whale populations and guide conservation efforts. However, the continued whaling by Norway, Iceland and Japan and the ever-present threat of the moratorium being lifted, seriously undermine these efforts and call into question the sustainability of conservation measures being implemented.

Whaling and the Global 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

Central to the United Nation's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development are the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which will shape national development plans until 2030.

OceanCare welcomes SDG 14 to conserve and sustainably use the oceans and advocates for urgent action to be taken by all stakeholders to ensure achievement of its various targets. Increased consideration of the socioeconomic and cultural benefits of marine environment protection and the interconnection between SDG 14 and the other SDGs is also strongly encouraged, particularly with regard to the wide range of ecosystem services that humans derive from the oceans.

The IWC like other intergovernmental bodies has a political and moral obligation to orientate its work towards the achievement of the 2030 Agenda. Global understanding of sustainability has evolved considerably since 1946 when the IWC agreed to the moratorium on commercial whaling stating that it was a temporary ban. We now know that sustainable development is a highly integrated concept and consequently governments must recognise that the sustainability of commercial whaling cannot be judged on the basis of population numbers alone.

The case for strengthening and securing the moratorium for the longer term must now be looked at in these terms. The SDG's present an opportunity for the whaling issue to be considered under a new lens which recognises that sustainable use no longer needs to translate to lethal use and which instead takes into account the socioeconomic importance of protecting whales both for whale watching and the ecosystem services they provide as well as for the preservation of biodiversity in our oceans. This briefing describes

the relevance of the SDGs to the whaling issue and OceanCare's recommendations for further action.

SDG 2: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture

Whilst some pro-whaling governments propose the hunting of whales as a necessary solution to the global food crisis due to perceived competition for fish and the need to utilise whale meat as a food source, there are major flaws in this argument.

As long lived, slow breeding animals, whose populations are already severely depleted and which face a myriad of other threats which humans have not yet successfully managed, including ocean noise, by-catch, the consequences of marine debris (entanglement, ingestion, etc.), food depletion, chemical pollution, habitat degradation and climate change, whales can never be considered as a sustainable food source and communities with a dependency on their meat may face a constant threat to their on-going food security.

There is also insufficient evidence that whales present any significant issue for fisheries. Before the over-exploitation caused by commercial hunting, whales were far more plentiful than they are today and yet the world's fish stocks were not in decline as they are now. Marine ecosystems are extremely complex and scientists have to date not been able to predict the results of a marine mammal cull on fish populations and fishery yields from them². However, scientists have proposed that due to the vital role whales play in the ecosystem, recovery of whale populations could actually lead to increased productivity for fisheries (see SDG 14 section of this briefing).

The global over-fishing crisis and all of its contributing factors including Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing, over-exploitation of local resources by distant water fleets and unsustainable fishing subsidies, is a far greater threat to the food security of human populations than whales. Any actions which distract from this core issue are likely to further prolong appropriate action being taken to manage fisheries sustainably.

SDG 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages

Good health is dependent on healthy, nutritious food however the mounting evidence linking cetacean

consumption to numerous human health problems and diseases means that it would be detrimental to consider whale meat as a good or sustainable source of nutrition.

The high levels of man-made contaminants that exist in the marine environment are ingested by marine organisms and accumulate in the food chain. The serious health impacts of consuming such pollutants are now recognised internationally, with evidence that consumption of cetacean products with high pollutant levels is linked to impaired pre-and post-natal development as well as adverse health effects in adults^{3,4}.

SDG 8: Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all

SDG target 8.9 focuses on the need to promote sustainable tourism in order to create jobs and promote local culture and produce⁵. Whale watching is now a huge and growing form of eco-tourism worldwide with over 13 million people a year taking a whale watching trip in an industry spanning 119 countries and overseas territories worldwide, generating \$2.1 billion in total revenues. An estimated 3,300 operators offer whale watching trips around the world, employing an estimated 13,200 people⁶. When conducted responsibly and sustainably, whale watching presents an economic opportunity for many coastal communities around the world.

However, whaling represents a threat to the whale watching industry as whale watching operators depend on healthy populations of whales and dolphins and being able to reliably predict their movements. Any further depletion of their numbers or exploitation activities which change their behaviour towards whale watching boats and humans is therefore problematic. Due to the migratory nature of whales, whaling is a particularly contentious issue for countries whose whale populations are subject to commercial hunts when they migrate. The on-going dispute between Japan and Australia which has involved an International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling against Japan, is one particularly prominent example of this. It is also a growing issue of concern amongst Caribbean and Latin American countries who enjoy the sustainable economic benefits of growing whale watching industries, but whose whale 'resources' are hunted in the Northern Hemisphere for part of the year.

SDG 12: Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns

This goal recognises the lessening ability of the natural resource base to supply food. It has specific targets which ask governments by 2030 to achieve the sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources and to ensure that people everywhere have the relevant information and awareness for sustainable development and lifestyles in harmony with nature⁷.

Whaling cannot be aligned with these ambitions as it is an inherently unsustainable activity when done at a commercial level. The historic over-exploitation of whale populations which put many species to the brink of extinction and at levels which were not commercially viable demonstrates the devastating impacts any resumption of commercial whaling can have. As an example, Antarctic blue whales were reduced to less than one percent of their historical population level⁸ and although the moratorium on commercial whaling has no doubt aided recovery, to this day very few species have recovered close to their pre-exploitation levels. There is still a long way to go before most whale species are 'safe' from the threat of extinction and there is a need for ongoing management measures to ensure their protection from deliberate exploitation.

Whaling can also not be considered sustainable due to the detrimental impact it may have on the ability of nations to fulfil their other SDG targets and goals, i.e., the development of ecotourism.

SDG 14 - Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development and SDG 13 - Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts

The issue of whaling has been a focal point in the historic development of international marine policy, for example the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling (ICRW) in 1946 was one of the first major international environmental treaties ever implemented. However, despite the long duration of attention being given to the conservation of whales, the threat that continued whaling poses to their survival remains more relevant now than ever due to the increasing array of additional dangers they face. At the same time, the value of whales as living resources that can be utilised by the ecotourism industry through whale watching activities has grown in recognition globally.

Recognising the dependency that humans have on the world's oceans; to regulate the vital life support systems of our planet, for food and for livelihoods, governments are asked to achieve sustainable management and

protection of marine and coastal ecosystems by 2020⁹ (SDG 14.2). Providing adequate protection for marine megafauna such as whales is a critical component of this, especially considering the vital benefits they provide to marine ecosystems.

Whales represent a significant biomass in the ocean and this has consequences in both their life and death. Whales have been called 'ecosystem engineers' due to their ability to recycle nutrients and enhance primary productivity in areas where they feed. They feed at depths releasing 'fecal plumes' near the surface which supports plankton growth. Through their migration patterns, whales also transport nutrients thousands of miles from productive feeding areas at high latitudes to calving areas at lower latitudes. Even in death, the carcasses of dead whales provide habitat and food for other ocean life with many deep water species dependent on the substantial food provided by dead whales¹⁰. It has been estimated that whales and seals may be responsible for replenishing 23,000 metric tons of nitrogen per year in the Gulf of Maine's euphotic or sunlight zone, "more than the input of all rivers combined."¹¹

There is evidence to suggest that recovery of whale populations could increase ocean productivity via the nutrients they spread and therefore support healthy fisheries¹². In addition, in relevance to SDG 13 on addressing climate change, maintaining healthy whale populations also facilitates the ocean's role as a 'carbon sink'. Due to their exceptionally large size, whales store a large amount of carbon in their bodies and when they die this carbon from the atmosphere is exported to the deep oceans in their carcasses. It is thought that restoration of all whale populations to their pre-hunted levels would be the equivalent to preserving 843 hectares of forests each year¹³.

Several existing UN organisations and instruments, and biodiversity-related Multilateral Environment Agreements, including the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) make provisions aimed at addressing many of the complex threats whales face. The implementation of marine protected areas is a step which is encouraged within the SDGs (SDG 14.5) and can be a proven effective measure for the protection of whales. However, supporting the elimination of direct removals is one of the easiest commitments that governments can make to facilitate the recovery of whale populations.

Recommendations

OceanCare proposes the following important actions for governments to address whaling and consider the future of the IWC in the context of the SDGs:

- Oppose any proposals that would undermine or threaten the whaling moratorium, including any proposals that would amend CITES listings or which would favour pro-whaling interests, on the grounds that a resumption of commercial whaling and trade in whale products is not compatible with sustainable development in the 21st Century.
- Increase efforts to address existing commercial whaling activities which already undermine the whaling moratorium, including those being undertaken by Norway and Iceland that are currently not core to discussions at the IWC despite their obvious contradiction to the whaling ban and the functionality of the IWC.
- Recognise the real threat of food security that impacts many people around the world and threatens to impact many more as the world's human population continues to expand but simultaneously recognise that long-lived, slow breeding mammals such as whale species are inherently unsuitable as a reliable food source to alleviate this threat. Dependencies on such species as protein sources seriously risk the ability of coastal communities to provide for future generations and the conservation status of these species.
- Encourage pro-whaling countries to turn their food security ambitions and concerns toward the more urgent and effective action of addressing over-fishing (in its various forms) and industrialisation and marginalisation of coastal communities. Developed countries must recognise their responsibilities to assist less developed countries with these challenges, in particular by addressing their own activities which contribute to these problems. The IWC should be encouraged to increase its cooperation with relevant fisheries bodies such as the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations to encourage increased action on these issues.
- Provide information to the IWC which demonstrates the socioeconomic value of cetacean species in the context of sustainable development and non-lethal use, particularly with regard to eco-system services and eco-tourism activities.
- Propose reforms of the IWC which will allow the Convention to contribute meaningfully to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly

SDG 14 and to collaborate effectively with other relevant intergovernmental bodies in achieving its relevant targets and address the cumulative challenges of cetacean conservation that exist today.

Conservation and sustainable development are intrinsically linked and OceanCare will be working with partners to define and advocate for solutions that benefit both local communities and wildlife. OceanCare's Voluntary Commitments to secure protection for the ocean giants as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development can be found here: <https://oceanconference.un.org/commitments/?id=16054>

References

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- ¹² Ibid
- ¹³ Pershing AJ, Christensen LB, Record NR, Sherwood GD, Stetson PB (2010) The Impact of Whaling on the Ocean Carbon Cycle: Why Bigger Was Better. *PLoS ONE* 5(8): e12444. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0012444>

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