

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 used to categorise their whaling as scientific research, also known as 'special permit whaling'¹ prior to its departure from the IWC in June 2019 and now overtly whales commercially. Aboriginal Subsistence Whaling is also carried out by a small number of countries and this is allowed provided that they meet 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 that a few whaling nations are 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 and countries in support of pro-whaling policies to now lift the ban and allow commercial whaling to resume with the blessing of the international community. Strong resistance from countries opposed to whaling 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.

In the 40 years since the moratorium was adopted, the IWC has been evolving and in the last 25 years 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 as 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 are meant to shape national development plans until 2030.

OceanCare welcomes SDG14 which outlines a framework 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 2030 Agenda represents a new and forward looking way to look at development. Values, moral issues, fairness and justice, including ethics, are intrinsic elements of this agenda. Taking this seriously will challenge institutions like the IWC and other intergovernmental bodies to rethink their modus operandi. Global understanding of sustainability has evolved considerably since 1946. It also significantly evolved since 1982 when the IWC agreed to the moratorium on commercial whaling stating that it was a temporary measure whilst populations were assessed. Today, we much better understand the complexity of these species and how vulnerable they are. Fulfilling the 2030 Agenda to accomplish a 'transformative change' demands novel ways of thinking about problems and finding solutions, Sustainable development is a highly integrated concept. Handling the global population of all cetaceans according to the principles laid out in the 2030 Agenda, will demand new thinking, robust research, and stringent regulations. Consequently, governments must now recognise that the sustainability of commercial whaling cannot be judged only on the basis of an abundance estimate of a species.

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 recognising 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 suggest that the hunting of whales is necessary to solve the global food crisis, there are, however, major flaws in this argument.

Whales are long lived and slow breeding animals making them fragile species. Because of years of reckless human behaviour, many of their populations are severely depleted. All the cetaceans now face a myriad of threats which humans are not successfully managing to reduce: increasing ocean noise, by-catch, the consequences of marine plastic pollution (entanglement, ingestion, etc.), food depletion, chemical pollution, habitat degradation and climate change.

There is also insufficient evidence proving that whales present any significant threat to 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). This concept has actually already been endorsed by the IWC itself.

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 truly a major threat to the food security of people. Any actions which distract from this core issue are likely to further prolong appropriate action from 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 some cetacean consumption to numerous human health problems and diseases indicates that it would be unwise to simply 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 growing 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. This industry now comprises 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. Servicing over 13 million people a year taking a whale watching trip. 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. Due to the migratory nature of whales, whaling has become a contentious issue for countries claiming the right to hunt these migratory species. Hunting whales within the borders of one nation may affect the number of whales migrating into the national waters of another country. The on-going dispute between Japan and Australia which has involved the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and which ruled against Japan, is one particularly prominent example of this. Threats to the stability and future of the whale-watching industry are a growing concern for Caribbean and Latin American countries. These countries now enjoy growing economic benefits with employment opportunities from whale watching industries. These countries have also been at pains to develop this industry according to principles of sustainable development as prescribed by the SDGs. The problem is that the principal resource of this industry, the whales, are being hunted in the Northern Hemisphere for part of the year.

SDG 12 – Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns

Implicit in this goal lies the recognition that there is an urgent need to distribute and manage all resources of the world in a just and sustainable manner. This includes to a large degree the world's food resources. SDG 12 also 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 at the end was at levels not commercially viable and which drove many species and populations to the brink of extinction, does demonstrate the devastating impacts any resumption of commercial whaling can have. As an example, the Antarctic Blue Whales were reduced to less than one percent of their historical population level⁸. Although the moratorium on commercial whaling has no doubt aided recovery, to this day very few populations 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.

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 oceans are the focus of SDG 14. Every target of this SDG relates to the issue of whales. The issue of whaling has been a focal point in the historic development of international marine policy. In fact, the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling (ICRW) agreed to 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, their future survival has far from been secured today. Because of the increasing array of additional and documented environmental dangers whales are facing, observing and reducing the threat that continued whaling poses to their survival remains more relevant now than ever. As stated above, the value of whales as living resources can be illustrated by the ecotourism industry through whale watching, activities growing 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 the entire population of cetaceans where whales are critical components, especially considering the vital benefits they provide to marine ecosystems, becomes urgent as oceans are increasingly threatened by anthropogenic activities.

Whales represent a significant biomass in the ocean. Scientists estimate that between 60 and 90 percent of all whales have been removed from the ocean ecosystem since whale hunting began more than a thousand years ago.¹⁰ 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 whales¹¹. 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 euphoric or sunlight zone, "more than the input of all rivers combined."¹²

There is also evidence to suggest that recovery of whale populations could increase ocean productivity via the nutrients they spread and therefore support healthy fisheries¹³. Removing top predators like whales, could dramatically disturb the ocean's food webs leading to trophic cascades and thus adversely affecting global fishing as well.

In relevance to SDG 13 on addressing climate change, maintaining healthy whale populations facilitates the ocean's role as a 'carbon sink'. Researchers have also proven that "the impact of rebuilding fish and whales would be comparable to existing carbon sequestration projects." Due to their exceptionally large size, whales store a large amount of carbon in their bodies. Researchers state in an article from 2010, that the carbon stored in marine vertebrates is only a small part of the total carbon in marine ecosystems, but still significant for the oceans' balanced sustainability. For example, "rebuilding the southern hemisphere blue whale population would sequester carbon equivalent to preserving 43,000 hectares of temperate forest ... rebuilding ten percent of the largest species of the whale populations would store carbon equivalent to 110,000 hectares of forest ... restoring all whale populations to pre-industrial levels would through sinking of dead whales export an additional 160,000 tons of carbon."

Several UN bodies and instruments, 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 in a positive direction which is encouraged by the SDGs (SDG 14.5) and can be a proven effective measure for the protection of whales. However, supporting a whaling ban is one of the easiest commitments 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 ban on commercial whaling (moratorium), including any proposals that would amend CITES listings as such efforts are not compatible with sustainable development in the 21st Century.
- Work towards the ceasing of any commercial whaling activities by Parties and Non-Parties to the IWC and evolve the IWC into a modern conservation organisation contributing to achieving the Agenda 2030 and its SDGs.
- Recognise the real threat to food security that impacts many people around the world and threatens to impact many more as the world's human population continues to grow 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 sources for proteins will seriously imperil the ability of coastal communities to provide for future generations and make efforts to conserve of these species futile.
- 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), 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.
- 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 and promote capacity building initiatives within less developed countries in this respect.

- 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 inter-governmental 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://sdgs.un.org/partnerships/securing-protection-oceans-giants/commitments/?id=16054>

References

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