

Nations fail to limit whaling, Japan still hunts

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Japan's fishery minister Yasue Funayama, right, and delegation member Hideo Jinpu attend the opening session of the 62nd International Whaling Commission in Agadir, Morocco, Monday, June 21, 2010. The International Whaling Commission is holding its most important meeting in decades, as nations ponder whether to suspend the porous 25-year ban on commercial hunting in favor of a more enforceable regime of limited whaling. (AP Photo/Abdeljalil Bounhar)

(AP) -- An international effort to truly limit whale hunting collapsed Wednesday, leaving Japan, Norway and Iceland free to keep killing hundreds of mammals a year, even raiding a marine sanctuary in Antarctic waters unchecked.

The breakdown put diplomatic efforts on ice for at least a year, raised the possibility that South Korea might join the whaling nations and raised questions about the global drive to prevent the extinction of the

most endangered whale species.

It also revived doubts about the effectiveness and future of the International Whaling Commission. The agency was created after World War II to oversee the hunting of tens of thousands of whales a year but gradually evolved into a body at least partly dedicated to keeping whales from vanishing from the Earth's oceans.

"I think ultimately if we don't make some changes to this organization in the next few years it may be very serious, possibly fatal for the organization - and the whales will be worse off," said former New Zealand Prime Minister Geoffrey Palmer.

Japanese officials and environmentalists traded charges of blame after two days of intense, closed-door talks failed to break a deadlock in which the three whaling nations offered to limit their catch but refused to phase it out completely.

About 1,500 animals are killed each year by the three countries. Japan, which kills the majority of whales, insists its hunt is for scientific research - but more whale meat and whale products end up in Japanese restaurants than in laboratories.

Several whale species have been hunted to near extinction, gradually recovering since the ban on commercial whaling went into effect in 1986, while other species like the smaller minke whale are still abundant. But the whale arouses deep passions around the world, because it was one of the first icons of the [animal conservation](#) movement, starting with the popular Save The Whale campaign of the 1970s.

A key sticking point is the sanctity of an ocean region south of Australia that the agency declared a whaling sanctuary in 1994. Despite that declaration, Japanese whalers regularly hunt in [Antarctic waters](#), a

feeding ground for 80 percent of the world's whales, and the commission has no enforcement powers to stop them.

Australia has already launched a complaint against Japanese whaling at the International Court of Justice in The Hague, the U.N.'s highest court.

Japan delegate Yasue Funayama said her country had offered major concessions and agreed "to elements which are extremely difficult to accept." She blamed the failure of the talks on countries that refused to accept the killing of even a single animal.

Palmer, who worked with 12 countries to help draft a compromise, commended Japan, which he said "showed real flexibility and a real willingness to compromise."

The United States had pushed hard for a deal to bring the three rogue nations back under the commission's control and recognize a limited catch, but finding an acceptable number of whales to kill proved elusive. A proposal drafted by the commission's chairman suggested a limit of 400 whales per year for five years, then going down to 200.

"After nearly three years of discussions, it appears our discussions are at an impasse," said chief U.S. delegate Monica Medina.

Australia, leading the hardline anti-whaling nations, hailed the outcome that preserved the ban on commercial whaling, even though it is flouted by the three whaling states which claim exemptions. Australia was supported by a bloc of Latin American countries.

"The fact that there wasn't a consensus on the compromise is the right place for the commission to be," said Australian Environment Minister Peter Garrett.

South Korea acknowledged that it wants the right to hunt whales and may apply to the commission for a quota.

The Koreans opposed the latest proposal because it "allows whaling only for countries currently involved in [commercial whaling](#), which excludes South Korea," said Lee Kang-eun of the department of fishery policies in Seoul.

The 88-nation whaling agency is about evenly split between countries that oppose whaling and nations who advocate sustainable whaling.

Some environmentalists have accused Japan of using its foreign aid to recruit nations into the whaling commission so they support Japan's position. Ten years ago the commission had only 41 members, but today it includes landlocked nations like Mali that have no direct interest in whaling or ocean conservation.

But the delegate from St. Kitts and Nevis, Daven Joseph, told the media and environmental groups to stop such allegations.

"We have been accused of being surrogates. That is not the case," he said.

Many environmentalists blamed Japan for the breakdown.

"If Japan had agreed to a phase out in the Southern Ocean, there would have been a good chance" for a deal, said Wendy Elliott of WWF.

Others expressed relief that the 25-year ban on whaling was not lifted.

"Had it been done here, this deal would have lived in infamy," said Patrick Ramage of the International Fund for Animal Welfare.

The commission's annual meeting ends Friday. Talks now are likely to focus on less controversial issues, such as preventing collisions by [whales](#) and ships, the effects of climate change and proposed Russian oil exploration in the seasonal feeding grounds of the endangered gray whale.

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