

Whalers in crosshairs at international huddle

October 22 2016, by Mari  tte Le Roux



South Korean activists portraying Japanese fishermen spear a "whale" during a protest against Japan's whaling fleet outside the Japanese embassy in Seoul

More than 80 nations square off in Slovenia next week over the fate of the world's remaining whales, facing a multitude of perils from meat hunters and ship strikes to getting snared in fishing gear.

The stage is set for heated debate, as the 88 members of the International Whaling Commission (IWC) are deeply divided along pro- and anti-hunting lines.

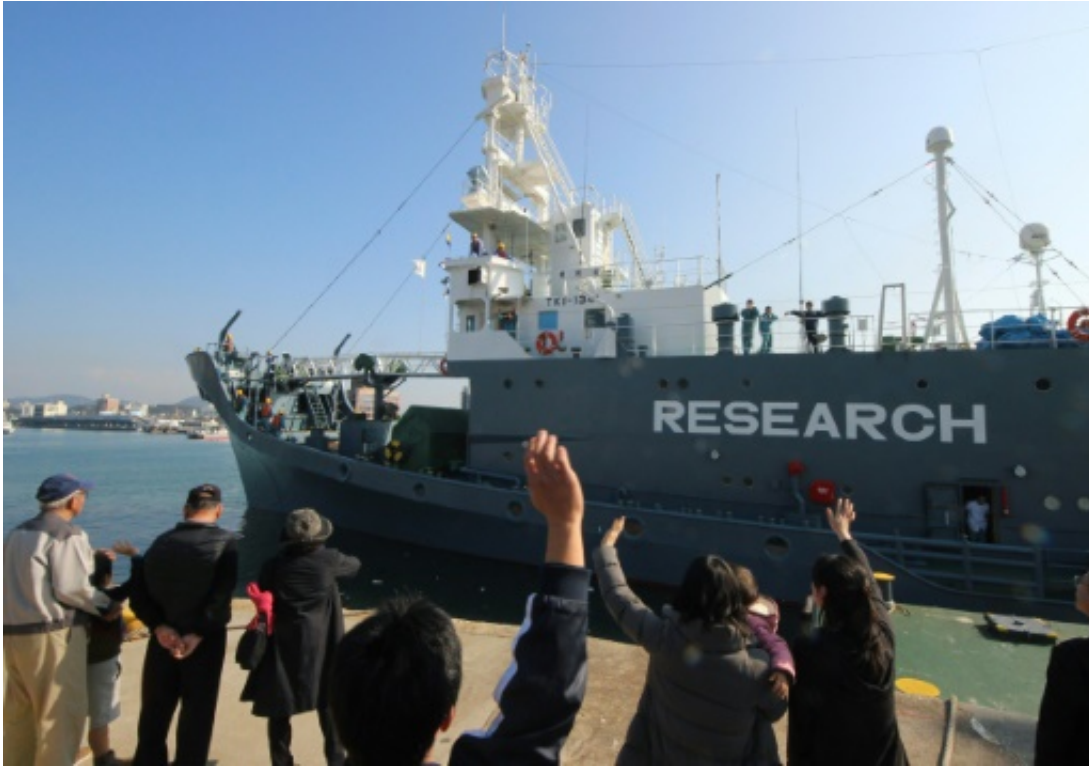
The biggest bones of contention are Japan's yearly whale hunt in the name of science, which critics insist is for dinner tables instead, and a proposal for a South Atlantic sanctuary to protect the majestic marine mammals.

Hunting nations Japan, Norway and Iceland are traditionally pitted against much of the rest of the world at the biennial IWC meetings, which seek to balance issues of national sovereignty, subsistence rights and culture with conservation of Earth's natural bounty.

For environmentalists, it is an issue of cruelty as well.

"Whaling has no place in the 21st century. It's outdated, it's thoroughly inhumane," Claire Bass of Humane Society International told AFP from the Adriatic coastal town of Portoroz, where the commission's 66th meeting will take place from Monday to Friday.

"There is no humane way to kill whales at sea," she said, pointing out that many die long drawn-out deaths from horrific wounds inflicted by harpoons with explosive tips.



A Japanese whaling ship leaves the port of Shimonoseki in Yamaguchi prefecture, western Japan to resume whale hunting in the Antarctic

This year's meeting marks the 70th anniversary of the commission's founding, and the 30th birthday of a whaling moratorium estimated to have prevented the killing of tens, even hundreds, of thousands of whales.

The moratorium is credited with allowing many whale populations to recover after being hunted to near-extinction in the 20th century for meat and blubber used to make soap and fuel.

The only commission-sanctioned way to catch whales is with an aboriginal subsistence whaling licence—issued to indigenous communities in North America, Russia, Greenland, and the Caribbean nation of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines.

Japan sets its own quotas for what it says are scientific hunts, while Norway and Iceland do commercial hunts under legal loopholes.

Science or sushi?

Since 1985, according to the latest IWC figures, 16,235 whales have been hunted for science, 24,381 for commerce, and 10,139 under aboriginal subsistence permits.

In 2014/15, Japan caught 90 Sei, 25 Bryde's and 81 minke whales—a total of 196 for the year.



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The International Court of Justice ruled in 2014 that Japan was abusing the scientific exemption. Tokyo cancelled its 2014/15 hunt, only to resume it the following year, netting an estimated 300-plus animals.

On next week's agenda is a proposal by Australia and New Zealand for a rigorous process to review scientific whaling proposals and programmes.

The biggest hunter by far today is Norway—netting 736 minke whales in 2014.

Iceland caught 137 fin and 24 minke whales the same year.

The traditional taste for whale meat, however, has declined significantly in all three countries.

Under aboriginal subsistence catches, the IWC said, 157 minke, 124 gray, 53 bowhead, nine humpback and 12 fin whales were taken in 2014—355 in total.



An anti-whaling protestor holds up a leaflet outside the Norwegian embassy in central London

The biggest haul was for autonomous Danish territory Greenland with 176 whales, followed by the Chukotka region in Russia's Far East with 124, and Alaska in the United States with 53.

Another divisive issue on the agenda is a proposal by Argentina, Brazil, Gabon, South Africa and Uruguay—countries which depend on whale-

watching tourist dollars—to create a 20 million-square kilometre (eight square mile) South Atlantic Whale Sanctuary.

The bid—which requires a 75 percent majority to pass—has failed at several previous meetings.

During the 20th century, the vast majority of whaling took place in the southern hemisphere, and many populations are still recovering, observers say.

"The creation of (a) South Atlantic Whale Sanctuary would be a huge milestone for whale protection," said Greenpeace whale expert John Frizell.

"With the multitude of problems facing these magnificent creatures, they need healthy oceans and they certainly do not need a return to commercial whaling."

Anti-whaling nations and conservation groups will push hard for projects to reduce fisheries bycatch, which kills an estimated 300,000 [whales](#), dolphins and porpoises every year.

"As much as Japan cannot be allowed to continue its unlawful whaling operations, the IWC cannot continue to avoid tackling the biggest killer of the lot—bycatch," said Aimee Leslie, head of the WWF's cetacean programme.

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