

Whaling watchdog concludes discordant meeting

October 28 2016, by Mariëtte Le Roux



Anti-whaling nations voted for the creation of a body to better scrutinise Japan's annual whaling hunt, conducted under scientific licence but blasted by critics as a commercial meat haul

The world's whaling watchdog concluded a typically discordant meeting Friday with defeats for both the pro- and anti-whaling camps, and the organisation's very purpose called into question.

After a week marked by a classic standoff between whaling nations Japan, Norway and Iceland on the one hand and mainly Western and

South American countries on the other, the International Whaling Commission (IWC) agreed on the need for introspection.

The commission, which turns 70 this year, "has been in a stalemate due to the fundamentally conflicting views on whales and whaling," reads a Japanese request for a working group to find ways of addressing the body's "dysfunction."

Just one example of the sometimes paralysing deadlock was a proposal by whale-watching nations to create a South Atlantic sanctuary, which was voted down on Tuesday by the pro-whaling bloc, as it has been every other time since it was first brought to the commission in 2001.

To pass, the resolution needed a 75 percent majority of member votes at the IWC's 66th meeting in the Adriatic resort town of Portoroz.

Anti-whaling nations, in turn, voted for the creation of a body to better scrutinise Japan's annual hunt, conducted under scientific licence but blasted by critics as a commercial meat haul.

They also defeated Tokyo's umpteenth bid to be allowed small hunts by coastal communities it claims are unjustly barred from a traditional source of food under a 30-year-old commercial whaling moratorium.

'Extreme polarisation'

"Because of this stalemate, we just will not change our position... whatever the proposal is.

"The other side is the same, irrespective of the content or science or law: if that includes some whaling they will just oppose," Japan's IWC commissioner Joji Morishita said.



Japan's International Whaling Commissioner Joji Morishita attends the 66th International Whaling Commission meeting in Portoroz, Slovenia, on October 24, 2016

"Unless... we address this issue in some manner, we will just be repeating the same thing meeting after meeting," he said, wondering if it was worth having such a body if it was unable to tackle "differences in opinion".

Japan's backers included Iceland, which said the process was being "held hostage" by "extreme polarisation."

Although commission members did not accept Japan's request for a working group, they did agree to a discussion between now and the next meeting in Brazil in 2018, which Morishita will chair.

Outgoing commission chairman Bruno Mainini of Switzerland agreed that solutions to the most divisive issues "probably can't be found through voting".

"I think the goal of all conventions, all organisations should be to accommodate the interests of all," he told AFP.

"Right now it seems to be impossible to accommodate because... (of) the moratorium" thwarting the desire of some IWC members to conduct whaling.

"Sooner or later, all the interested parties may have to move and tackle these issues," Mainini said.

He highlighted the commission's successes, including many countries giving up commercial whaling and the recovery of many stocks hunted to near-extinction in the 20th century, such as the humpback whale.

In comparison to the "one or two thousand" whales landed by IWC members per year, some 300,000 cetaceans, the family of whales, dolphins and porpoises, are killed through other human activities, mainly as fishing bycatch, he added.

Also, "there are countries (which) are not members of the IWC and they are more or less free to do what they want," he said.



Protestors hold up a placard reading 'It's time to take whale meat off the menu' as they demonstrate during the 66th International Whaling Commission meeting in Portoroz, Slovenia, on October 24, 2016

Institutional divisions

But Washington's IWC commissioner, Russell Smith, does not believe the commission is dysfunctional.

"Everybody agrees that the conservation of whales is very important, everybody agrees that aboriginal subsistence whaling is important and that the management of that is the responsibility of the commission," he told AFP.

"Those are two of the major things that the commission continues to do and can continue to do even if we don't agree on... the issue of

commercial whaling."

The moratorium excludes aboriginal subsistence whaling, for which the IWC issues catch limits, and killing whales for scientific research.

Norway and Iceland have lodged formal objections to the moratorium, and continue commercial hunts.

Conservation group Greenpeace also lamented "institutional divisions" at the IWC.

The proposal for an Atlantic sanctuary "fell along dividing lines all too familiar to long-term IWC members," it said.

"Clashes throughout the week between whaling nations and their supporters and other members demonstrated how difficult it is for the body to reach consensus."

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