



# WHALES STILL NEED SPECIAL PROTECTION

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The history of whaling in the 20th century demonstrates clearly that whales need special protection from trade pressures. The relentless erosion of whale populations by the whaling industry in the first half of this century led to the formation of the International Whaling Commission (IWC) in 1946. Its founders were clearly aware of the problem which was recognised in the preamble to the IWC's Convention:

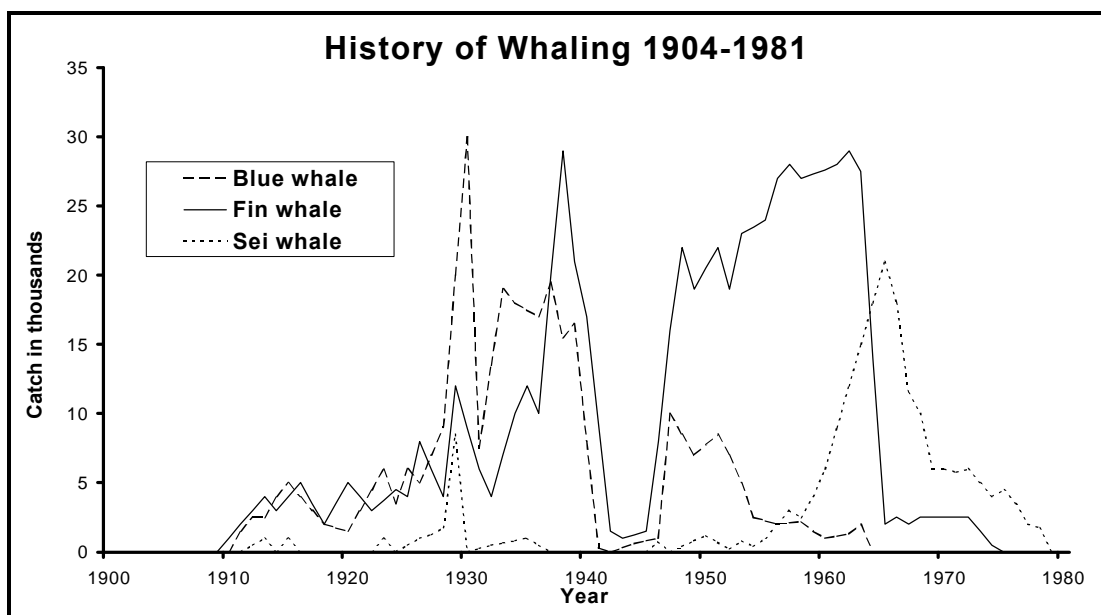
*"Considering that the history of whaling has seen over-fishing of one area after another and of one species of whales after another to such a degree that it is essential to protect all species of whales from further over-fishing."*

But despite the clearly recognised lessons of the past, the IWC was unable to regulate whaling. Under its attempts to carry out scientific management the blue whales of the Antarctic were pushed to the edge of extinction with the loss of 99% of their biomass. Catching blue whales was banned in 1966 but their population shows little sign of recovery. The industry switched its effort to the smaller fin whales which lost 95% of their biomass and were protected in 1976. The next smallest Antarctic whales, the sei

whales, were then targeted and by 1978 needed protection.

Whales are mammals, not fish, but they have historically been treated as fish by the whaling industry and by some governments. Most fish species reproduce by the female releasing huge quantities of eggs into the water for fertilisation by the males, although under normal conditions very few of these will develop into mature adults. Whales, on the other hand, have a long gestation period and usually give birth only every one or two years, to a single calf that requires several years of nurturing (feeding and teaching) before it can survive on its own. Even after that young whales take many years to reach sexual maturity. For these reasons whales can never recover quickly from over-exploitation.

These factors are compounded by our lack of knowledge about many aspects of whale biology. Even after half a century of research, the growth rate of whale populations is poorly known because of the difficulty of studying these highly migratory animals which are long-living and slow to reproduce. Nor are there reliable estimates of live birth rates or of the natural mortality rates of calves and juveniles.



Source: Bureau of International Whaling Statistics

This is because whales spend their entire lives in the water and are under water and out of sight for most of their lives. Thus it is impossible to accurately count the population - instead populations must be estimated. These estimates are based on a count of the whales sighted on each side of a survey vessel as it zig-zags its way through a designated area of water. Since only a small percentage of the whales in any given population will be visible on the surface as the vessel passes, extrapolations are made from the number sighted to give an estimate for the entire region under study. Thus all population estimates are based on sightings of a tiny fraction of the population. For example a 1995 Norwegian minke whale survey sighted 29 whales in the eastern Barents Sea and this was extrapolated to a population estimate of 16,101 - over 500 times greater than the number of whales seen.

Mathematical formulas are used to calculate the total numbers from the small number of actual sightings. These attempt to take into account numerous variables such as the fact that certain species of whales tend to cluster in certain areas. It is in these formulas that an enormous potential for compounded error exists. Successive surveys of the same area have differed by up to a factor of 5 - a factor of two difference is not uncommon.

Recognising the extreme difficulty of managing whaling, which resulted in continuing depletions of populations, the IWC instituted a moratorium on commercial whaling in 1986. (Catches by native people for subsistence are still permitted.)

The attention of the whaling industry is now focused on the minke whale, the smallest of the baleen or 'whalebone' whales. Although minkes have not been depleted to anything like the extent of the larger species, this is because exploitation only began after the others had been nearly exterminated (in the North Atlantic in 1930, in the Antarctic in 1972) and because the IWC's moratorium and CITES's Appendix I listing had sharply limited the industry's expansion.

If anything, even less is known about the biology of the minke whale than of other, larger species. Despite years of intensive surveys the current numbers remain poorly known and are scientifically controversial, especially in the North

Atlantic. Unlike other species, unambiguous identification of the age of individuals remains difficult and in some places impossible and the migration routes and (presumed) tropical or subtropical breeding areas of the minke remain a mystery in all oceans except perhaps the southwest Atlantic



Minke whale attached to side of Japanese catcher ship

In addition to the purely biological problems, the whaling industry has been plagued by repeated violations of the rules. In 1994 it was revealed that during the 1960s and 70s Soviet fleets in the Antarctic had indulged in massive organised fraudulent reporting, taking tens of thousands of whales in excess of their quotas including endangered species. Some of this fraud continued, without detection at the time, even after an International Observer Scheme was introduced by the IWC. In 1998 it was revealed that Soviet whaling fleets in the North Pacific had also engaged in such large scale deception and that the Japanese coastal sperm whale industry had falsified reports to the IWC on the number, length and gender of whales taken. The Japanese fraud continued right up to 1987 when the industry was forced to close due to the IWC's commercial moratorium, the collapse of the sperm oil market and the inclusion of sperm whales on CITES Appendix I.

The IWC's moratorium on commercial whaling and the listing of whales protected by the moratorium in CITES Appendix I, which had the effect of eliminating the international trade in whale meat and oils, were wise and necessary measures to protect whales. These measures are still in force today.

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