

THE SOUTH PACIFIC SANCTUARY

The South Pacific Sanctuary will protect the breeding grounds of whales whose feeding grounds are within the Southern Ocean Sanctuary, thus ensuring that whaling is prohibited on these populations where ever they might be.

Some populations of whales within the South Pacific Sanctuary were devastated by commercial whaling. For example, the humpback whales around Tonga were virtually wiped out by commercial whaling. A South Pacific Sanctuary is needed to:

- protect severely depleted whale populations and allow for their recovery
- complement and improve the effectiveness of the Southern Ocean Sanctuary in protecting migratory whale species
- allow for and foster research on whale populations which are not being hunted

The range states of the South Pacific support the adoption of the sanctuary. In a communiqué issued after the South Pacific Forum meeting in August 1998, the Forum recalled its support for the Southern Ocean Sanctuary. The Forum continued to attach importance to the sustainable use of marine resources, noting that a greater level of protection for whales was appropriate, and also noted the internationally recognised need for sanctuaries to assist with the long-term conservation of great whales.

The Forum then gave its support to the development of a proposal to establish a South Pacific Whale Sanctuary for great whales to complement the existing Indian and Southern Ocean Sanctuaries.

The countries that make up the South Pacific Forum are: Australia, Cook Islands, Fiji, Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, New Zealand, Niue, Papua New Guinea, Palau, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu and Samoa

Building on the present

The idea of sanctuaries for whales is not new. The body responsible for ensuring the healthy state of whale populations, the International Whaling Commission (IWC), agreed in 1979 to establish the Indian Ocean Whale Sanctuary, protecting whales in their breeding and calving grounds.

Fifteen years later, in 1994, the IWC established the Southern Ocean Sanctuary. This covers all waters surrounding Antarctica and protects three quarters of the world's whales in their feeding grounds.

At the 1998 meeting of the IWC, plans for two further sanctuaries were put forward: the South Pacific Whale Sanctuary, suggested by Australia and New Zealand and the South Atlantic Sanctuary, suggested by Brazil. If accepted, these new sanctuaries would start where the Southern Ocean Sanctuary ends.

Extending Protection for the Great Whales

Full coverage from the freezing waters of the Antarctic to the warm waters of the equator is vital. Most of the great whales are highly migratory, feeding in the nutrient-rich waters of the Antarctic before travelling to tropical waters to give birth and suckle their young. They then make the long migration back to their feeding grounds. Since whales rarely cross the equator, establishment of these sanctuaries would mean that the whales of the Southern Hemisphere could live their entire lives in an area free from commercial whaling.

Rogue Nations Defy Moratorium on Commercial Whaling

Norway and Japan have continued to hunt whales in defiance of the 1986 ban, and in the face of overwhelming worldwide public opinion. Norway hunts whales commercially off its own coasts and Japan is pressing the IWC to allow it to do the same. In 1999 Norway hunted down 589 whales. In addition, Japan refuses to renounce high seas whaling, using factory ships capable of whaling thousands of miles from its home. This it justifies as "scientific" whaling. Using this excuse, Japan killed 489 whales in the Southern Ocean in the 1998/99 austral summer and in the North Pacific in 1999

Japan is not only defying the moratorium and opposing new sanctuaries, it is actually pressing to abolish the world's largest, the Southern Ocean Sanctuary, only five years after it was adopted.

Commerce Without Killing

Japan's whale hunt produces an annual income of about 36 million dollars and Norway's hunt produces about five million dollars a year, giving a worldwide income from wholesale sales of whale meat of about 41 million dollars a year. But whale watching is a much bigger industry -- with an income of over half a BILLION dollars a year worldwide. And it continues to grow.

This is true in the South Pacific region just as it is in other parts of the world. The Vava'u island group in the northern part of the Kingdom of Tonga is an area with a growing reputation as a whale watching destination. Over three quarters of the tourists arriving by plane in Vava'u during July to October (when the humpback whales are resident in the area) paid to go whale watching. It has been estimated that whales are worth at least T\$750,000 each year to Tonga and that the significance of this industry is likely to increase.

In addition to promoting research and conservation, sanctuaries will help encourage whale watching and the industry that develops around it. Increasing numbers of people who have seen whales in their natural habitats are supporting sanctuary for them. They want to see the whales they watch protected, not being hunted.

Whales are not fish

Whales are mammals, not fish, but they have been historically been treated as fish by the whaling industry.

The vast majority of fish species reproduce by releasing huge quantities of eggs into the water for fertilisation by the male, although under normal conditions only a small percentage 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 more than a year of maternal care before it can survive on its own. Even then whale calves take many years to reach maturity. For these reasons whales can never recover quickly from exploitation.

These factors are compounded by our lack of knowledge about many aspects of whale biology. Even after decades of research, the growth rate of whale populations is unknown because of the difficulty of studying these highly-migratory, long-lived, slow-reproducing animals. Nor are there reliable estimates of live birth rates or of the natural mortality rates of calves and juveniles.

Fishing industry representatives who stir up concern that a South Pacific Sanctuary would lead to a ban on fishing are deliberately confusing the public and disregarding the vastly different characteristics of two entirely unrelated groups of species.

Life in a changing ocean

The oceans have changed in the 50 years that the IWC has been attempting to manage whales. Known environmental threats to whales include climate change, pollution, over-fishing, ozone depletion, capture in fishing nets and even ship strikes.

The blubber of toothed whales, and even baleen whales, is now contaminated with organochlorines including PCBs, pesticides and dioxins - substances known to damage development of the young and affect reproduction. Young cetaceans, which are especially vulnerable, are exposed to such compounds both in the womb and via their mother's milk. The blubber of dead toothed whales from some areas contains such high levels of organochlorines that they are classified as toxic wastes.

Climate change will profoundly affect the productivity of the seas and warming will be concentrated in the colder polar regions. This may lead to decreases in the extent of sea ice with profound effects on ice edge-associated species, including whales and some of their most important prey species.

Overfishing threatens to fundamentally alter the ecological balance of species and marine biodiversity in the oceans. The fishing industry is increasingly targeting fish species at lower trophic levels as the higher

trophic level species are depleted. Overfishing threatens the food supply of whales and, in addition, whales are at risk from entanglement in fishing gear.

Expectations for the recovery of whale populations have been based on the assumption that, except for commercial hunting, their place in the oceans is as secure as it was a hundred years ago. Sadly, this assumption is no longer valid.