

How the South Pacific whale sanctuary was defeated

When the International Whaling Commission (IWC) met in Australia, in July 2000, many participants expected it to create a large whale sanctuary in the South Pacific. This sanctuary would have extended the existing Antarctic whale sanctuary, which covers the feeding grounds of the great whales, so that the warmer areas where the whales give birth and raise their young are also protected. The signs were good:

- The development of the sanctuary proposal was supported by South Pacific Forum, an intergovernmental group whose members include all 16 Pacific Island countries and territories within the proposed sanctuary area.
- The proposal had been under development for two years and scientific papers about the sanctuary were made available to the IWC's scientists.
- The director of the South Pacific Regional Environmental program attended the meeting and spoke in favour of the sanctuary which would bring both conservation and economic benefit to the area.

But it takes a 3/4 majority vote in favour to create a sanctuary at the IWC and when the vote came, the sanctuary proposal failed, with 18 votes in favour and 11 opposed. Six of the countries voting no were from the Eastern Caribbean – Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Grenada, St Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia and St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Without their votes opposing it the sanctuary would have passed easily, by 18 votes to 5. So why did these nations vote to deny a whale sanctuary to the small island states of the Pacific?

- St. Lucia cited legal arguments, especially the work of Professor Burke, an American academic whose work on the Antarctic whale sanctuary was funded by Japan and who is frequently cited by Japan.
- Antigua and Barbuda were concerned that creating a sanctuary went against the fundamental basis of the IWC [Dominica and St. Vincent said the same] and that the creation of any area closed to whaling would make management plans worthless. [But the IWC has been creating whale sanctuaries for over 50 years and currently has two such sanctuaries.]
- St. Vincent and the Grenadines were concerned that whales would damage fish populations and cited a case in Canada where due to a total ban on the catching of seals, the seal population grew sharply and destroyed the cod fishery, leading to its collapse. [This is simply not correct, the Government of Canada acknowledges that the collapse of the cod fishery was due to overfishing by industrialised fleets.]
- Dominica listed a number of threats to whales such as climate change and pollution and said that since a sanctuary does not protect whales against these, only against hunting, they would oppose it. [Given the threats posed

to whales from environmental change it is all the more important to eliminate hunting, the one threat that can be removed simply and cheaply.]

- St. Kitts and Nevis wanted the IWC to regulate whaling, not prohibit it, and so strongly opposed the establishment of the sanctuary.

The idea of sanctuaries is not new. The IWC established a whale sanctuary when the organisation was founded in 1946. Called simply The Sanctuary, it covered a quarter of the Southern Ocean, an area of millions of square miles lying between South America and New Zealand. It protected whales until 1955 when, under pressure from the industry, due to falling catches in the Antarctic, it was 'temporarily' opened. Within a year it was producing a quarter of the total Antarctic catch and remained open until the IWC moratorium came into effect in 1986. The IWC created the Indian Ocean Sanctuary in 1979 and the Southern Ocean Sanctuary in 1994.

The vote on the South Pacific Whale Sanctuary was not an isolated case. Here is record of the votes cast by the six Caribbean nations and Japan at the IWC 2000. The voting record of the UK is given for comparison.

Country	Vote No.							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Japan	N	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N	N
Antigua & Barbuda	N	Y	Y	Y	N	N	A	N
Dominica	N	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N	N
Grenada	N	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N	N
St Kitts & Nevis	N	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N	N
St Lucia	N	Y	Y	Y	N	N	-*	N
St Vincent & the Grenadines	N	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N	N
United Kingdom	Y	N	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y

Vote no 1 was the vote for the South Pacific Whale Sanctuary

* St Lucia was absent for this vote