

## **IWC 2005 briefing**

This year the International Whaling Commission (IWC) is meeting in South Korea. South Korea has a history of whaling and its waters are an important habitat for the Korean Gray Whale, one of the most critically endangered whale populations in the world.

Greenpeace is concerned that as human activities continue to degrade the world's oceans, species and populations of cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoises) are under increasing threat. Climate change, ozone depletion, toxic chemicals, noise pollution, over-fishing and ship strikes all have devastating impacts on cetaceans and are symptoms of a wider oceans' crisis. While Greenpeace works on all these environmental threats, whaling can be stopped immediately as a means of protecting cetacean species.

Yet, despite a worldwide ban on commercial whaling, it is estimated that this year three countries (Japan, Norway & Iceland) will between them kill over 2,000 whales, the meat from which will end up on sale.

The issues on the table at this year's IWC of particular concern are:

- increased quotas, and whale species of so-called 'scientific whaling'
- Japan's aggressive undemocratic tactics of buying votes from small developing countries.
- The pro-whalers' argument that whales need to be killed to protect fish stocks
- The growth of whale watching as a sustainable and profitable alternative to commercial whaling

### **'Scientific' whaling**

So-called 'scientific' whaling is quite simply commercial whaling in disguise. The concept was invented by the Japanese as a way of getting round the IWC's 1987 moratorium on commercial whaling.

Reports suggest that this year Japan plans to double its self-appointed 'scientific' quota of minke whales, as well as add two new species to the list of targets - endangered humpback and fin whales. All of these will be hunted in Antarctic waters, an area designated by the IWC as a whale sanctuary.

Japan claims that it needs to kill whales in order to find out more about them, but the IWC itself does not endorse this 'scientific' programme.

### **Vote-buying**

The Government of Japan has been working since 1999 to recruit a majority to vote with it at the IWC and overturn the global ban on commercial whaling. By offering development assistance in exchange for pro-whaling votes it has bought 14 poor

developing countries into the IWC, including landlocked countries like Mali. Japan's strategy of bribing poor countries to join the IWC and vote with them has been successful in blocking the establishment of whale sanctuaries in the South Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. Japan has decided it wants a return to full-scale commercial whaling and is trying to buy acceptance for this from the international community.

## **Whales and fish**

Japan argues that fish stocks are under threat due to whales eating them. There is no scientific basis for these claims and there are no marine biologists who believe that the natural consumption of fish and other biomass by whales, which has been going on for tens of millions of years, has any adverse effect on fish populations. Removing whales will not automatically result in an increase in fish catches. The oceans are not organised around simple food webs and some species of fish eaten by whales may be major predators of other commercially valuable fish.

The answer to the fisheries crisis lies in better regulation of fishing effort and the creation of large marine reserves where fish can recover and spread out to repopulate the areas depleted by over-fishing. Blaming whales for the problems of fisheries is like blaming woodpeckers for deforestation.

## **Whale watching – the future?**

Over the past decade whale watching has shown the potential to become far more profitable than commercial whaling ever was. It is already generating a massive \$1 billion a year annually. There are many advantages to this eco-tourism, if conducted properly it is a benign resource for genuine cetacean research and promotes an appreciation of the marine environment among the wider public.

Globally, an estimated 9 million people go whale watching each year in 87 countries. This number has increased on average by 12% annually since 1991 and looks set to rise. 34 member countries of the IWC now have a domestic whale watching industry. Iceland, where the Greenpeace ship 'Arctic Sunrise' is visiting during the IWC, has seen an explosive annual growth of 250% since 1994. Attracting 82,000 tourists a year and at a worth of \$18 million, whale watching is far more valuable to the Icelandic economy than commercial whaling ever was.