



The International Whaling Commission: A Vital Conservation Tool for Cetaceans

This briefing has been prepared for the new Defra team by the Wildlife and Countryside Link Marine Mammals Expert Group, England's largest coalition of groups working to protect marine mammals. We would be delighted to meet with the Minister to discuss further and answer any questions that arise.

Introduction:

The International Whaling Commission (IWC), established under the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling (ICRW), observed its 75th anniversary in 2021. Over almost eight decades, the IWC has grown from a small resource-management organisation of just 15 whaling nations, including the United Kingdom, into a respected multilateral environmental agreement of 88 members. During this time, as demand for whale products has declined and commercial whaling has ended in all but three nations—Norway, Iceland and Japan—the IWC has evolved from its original exclusive focus on regulating commercial whaling of large whales to offering expert recommendations for the conservation and management of *all* cetaceans, including dolphins and porpoises.

Today, the IWC is the global authority on the status of cetaceans and their welfare, the threats they face, including bycatch, pollution and vessel strikes, and how best to mitigate those threats. This [evolution in the IWC's mandate and priorities](#) is clear from its adoption of more than one hundred conservation-focused resolutions. It was consolidated in 2003 with the establishment of a Conservation Committee that oversees the Commission's threat mitigation agenda, coordinates with the longstanding Scientific Committee, and collaborates through externally-funded programmes with a wide range of stakeholders, including other intergovernmental organisations.

The IWC meets biennially. Its next meeting (IWC69) will be held in **Lima, Peru from 23-27 September, 2024.**

UK Leadership at IWC:

The UK has played a key leadership role in the IWC since its founding, including serving as host government to its secretariat in Cambridge, and hosting many meetings of the Commission and Scientific Committee. The UK was instrumental in securing a global ban on commercial whaling in 1982 (the moratorium) and an associated ban on international commercial trade in whale products at the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). The UK plays a central role in the IWC's Scientific and Conservation Committees and has led the expansion of the IWC's welfare agenda to keep pace with expanding scientific understanding of wild cetacean physiology, sentience and pain. It has also supported the extension of the IWC's management advice to non-lethal uses of cetaceans, including whale watching, and the IWC taking the contribution that cetaceans make to vital ecological functions, including carbon sequestration and ocean productivity, into consideration in Commission decision-making. The UK is currently instrumental in governance reform efforts to ensure that the IWC is fit for purpose and follows international best practice. Crucially, the UK has always been a key leader within the "like-minded"—an informal coalition of members that oppose commercial whaling and support the IWC's conservation agenda—and is a model of collaboration with its NGO community on IWC issues.



As the UK transitions to a new government ahead of IWC69, its longstanding support of the IWC remains critical. With commercial whaling continuing despite the moratorium, the ocean facing the triple threat of biodiversity loss, climate change and pollution, one in four cetacean species being threatened with extinction, and cetaceans facing additional pressure from bycatch, vessel strikes and other anthropogenic challenges, the global work of the IWC is more important than ever¹. Unfortunately, it faces threats to its reputation and financial stability from nations that oppose its conservation mandate and want to lift the moratorium. With 40 percent of its members currently in [arrears](#) of their annual fees and with a small, but vocal, minority of pro-whaling nations opposing its conservation work, even breaking quorum to prevent key votes, the IWC's future is precarious.

The collapse of the IWC would be devastating. The global ban on commercial whaling would be lost, likely followed by the CITES trade ban, and the IWC's research, management of subsistence whaling by indigenous people (known as Aboriginal Subsistence Whaling or ASW), threat mitigation programmes and conservation management plans would have no legitimate alternative international venue.

Despite falling demand for whale meat, Norway and Iceland continue to kill hundreds of whales a year in commercial whaling operations conducted under their respective objection and reservation to the moratorium. Japan left the IWC in 2019 but continues to hunt in its own waters, recently adding the poorly known North Pacific fin whale to the three whale species it already targets. Japan's commercial whaling is outside of international control and [the recent expansion](#) violates its legal [duty to cooperate](#) with the IWC. In the face of this recent aggressive expansion of whaling, and the other threats faced by cetaceans, the UK's continued investment in the IWC is vital to safeguard this unique and vital organisation and the animals that it seeks to protect.

The UK's Role in Safeguarding the Future of the IWC:

- **Ensure financial stability:** Continue to provide host government support to the IWC secretariat; encourage like-minded governments to pay their annual fees on time, settle arrears through repayment plans and contribute to the general fund to support core operational costs. The UK should also undertake regular outreach to disengaged and potential new members to emphasise the importance of the IWC and the value of membership.
- **Protect the global bans on whaling and trade:** Continue to reject all attempts to overturn or weaken the moratorium, such as resolutions aiming to restart negotiation of the Revised Management Scheme (RMS—the monitoring, supervision and control scheme to manage future commercial whaling) and promote whaling for food security. The UK should also continue to use diplomatic and public channels to state a strong opposition to the use of objections and reservations to hunt whales and trade in whale products, and continue to defend the CITES Appendix I listings for great whales.
- **Support and advance the conservation agenda:** Maintain a central role in the Conservation and Scientific Committees and continue to make contributions to both the general fund (e.g. for meeting and secretariat costs) and the voluntary funds that support conservation and welfare work programmes.

¹ <https://conbio.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cobi.14090>



- **Lead governance and financial reform:** Maintain a leadership role in ensuring that the IWC's rules of procedure and operational and financial arrangements are consistent with best practice, including promoting transparency and civil society participation.
- **Build the IWC's welfare agenda:** Encourage whaling nations to provide comprehensive welfare data to the IWC and ensure that the pain and suffering of cetaceans in both hunting and non-hunting situations is understood and minimised.

Ahead of IWC69, the UK can also undertake the following actions to help make the meeting a success:

- **Ensure the meeting is quorate:** Engage in outreach to all like-minded governments to ensure they will be represented at IWC69 (through a local embassy representative if necessary); support a pragmatic and practical new quorum rule and ensure the like-minded have a plan to secure the IWC's core business if a new rule is not agreed.
- **Support a resolution on commercial whaling:** In addition to proposing a new Commission agenda item on commercial whaling, support a resolution that raises concern about ongoing and increasing commercial whaling. If a resolution is not adopted, ensure that a strong majority statement is included in the record of the meeting that describes Japan's recent breach of its duty to cooperate.
- **Support pro-conservation proposals:** Co-propose and support schedule amendments, resolutions, and funding decisions that promote the conservation of cetaceans and their habitats, **increase** understanding of the effects of all environmental threats on cetaceans and support threat mitigation efforts such as new conservation management plans.

The Wildlife & Countryside Link Marine Mammals Group has been pleased to work closely with Defra over the years to support the IWC. We look forward to continuing this work, and would be pleased to meet to discuss any points of particular interest.

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