

25 years of whale protection in Australia



NICK GALES

Humpback whale (Megaptera novaeangliae) breaching

Australia this year celebrated the 25th anniversary of the end of commercial whaling in this country. It was on 4 April 1979 that the then Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser delivered a ministerial statement pledging his government's "total commitment to protect the whale". It was an historic step that led to a total ban on whaling in Australia and the development of policy for the protection of whales further afield in international waters.

At a ceremony in Canberra on 30 March, the Federal Minister for the Environment and Heritage Dr David Kemp praised the efforts of those Australian public service departments which, at the official level, had helped make Australia a leader in whale protection. He also made special mention of the non-Government organisations which played a pivotal role in the development of this policy and the pursuit of its objectives.

In celebration of this silver jubilee and in recognition of the Australian Government's commitment to whale protection, Dr Kemp received a 'Gift To The Earth' award, the highest possible recognition from the World Wide Fund for Nature.

Dr Kemp announced that the Government would be spending over \$500,000 this year to support scientists at the Australian Antarctic Division who he said 'are leading the charge with world-first research exposing the lack of scientific justification behind international whaling programs.' He also announced that \$350,000 from the Natural Heritage Trust would be spent this year on developing a national approach to whale strandings and studies into the populations, ecology and behaviour of whales.

Dr Kemp expressed the Government's concern at the ongoing slaughter of whales for commercial return, including those animals taken under the guise of so-called 'scientific' whaling (under which members of the International Whaling Commission – the IWC – grant unilateral permits for their nationals to conduct lethal research). Under 'scientific' whaling Iceland took 39 minke whales in 2003, and Japan took a total of 700 whales of various species. Norway's commercial whaling operation targets approximately 700 minke whales per year. He said that whale killing methods involve an unacceptable level of cruelty. In 2002, around one in every five North Atlantic minke whales struck by Norwegian whalers and three in every five Antarctic minke whales struck by Japanese whalers were not killed instantaneously. Some animals took more than 40 minutes to die after being struck by a harpoon.

The Australian Government supports research to increase our knowledge of the ecology of whales provided that research does not involve their killing. It views lethal research on whales as unnecessary to inform IWC management procedures and considers the practice equivalent to commercial whaling, which is prohibited by the IWC. Since its inception in 1996, Australia's Natural Heritage Trust has invested more than \$2.7 million in research and other activities to promote whale conservation. Australia has also provided support to the South Pacific Whale Research Consortium to assist its work in the region.

Non-lethal research is increasing our understanding of the complexity of the marine food web. This sort of research can be challenging,

especially when it involves obtaining samples from animals that never come ashore. However, boat-based researchers are able to collect skin samples and faecal material, and biologists are developing new techniques to obtain information from the samples.

DNA sampling provides more data than can be obtained through opening a dead whale's stomach and in a form that can be repeatedly and independently verified. Whereas stomach contents represent only a whale's recent intake, a series of whale scats gives a more complex picture of whale feeding habits, and of their internal parasites.

History shows that for more than 150 years Australia was a proud whaling nation. Whaling was good for the economy of the times. However, Dr Kemp made the interesting point in his address that, in today's terms, the final season of whaling in Australia (1978–79) produced direct revenue of around \$9.6 million and the company made a loss. This compares unfavourably with the revenues today's very profitable whale

	1978–79	2003–04
Great whales killed	28,240	1,866
Whaling nations	13	7
% commercial/scientific	99%	78%
% indigenous hunts	1%	22%
IWC members	17	49 (at 2003 meeting)



JAMES SHEVLIN

Top: Much has changed in 25 years. Above: Japanese whaling vessel with Minke whale catch.

watch operators generate, which have been estimated as up to \$42.5 million, with an additional flow-on effect to the Australian economy that is harder to calculate, but may amount to between \$149 million and \$325 million.

Australia's last operation – the Cheynes Beach Whaling Station at Albany in Western Australia, which was taking around 600 sperm whales annually – announced in 1978, during a national inquiry into the future of whaling in Australia, that it had decided to close its operations. The inquiry, headed by Sir Sydney Frost, received submissions from 101 organisations and 73 individuals and consulted 28 experts

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Albatross conservation advanced

Efforts to conserve seabirds took a significant step forward on 6 November 2003 when the Republic of South Africa ratified the Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels (ACAP) at a ceremony at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in Canberra.

The Republic of South Africa is the fifth country to become a party, meeting the threshold for ACAP's entry into force, which occurred on 1 February 2004. South Africa joins Australia, New Zealand, Ecuador and Spain as a party to ACAP. South Africa played a key role in the negotiation of ACAP and is home to many important populations of albatrosses and petrels, including those on the subantarctic Prince Edward Islands.

Albatrosses and petrels are among the most threatened group of birds in the world. Of the world's 24 species of albatrosses 83% are considered to be endangered, which compares with 11% of bird species overall. For some populations, such as the Macquarie Island wandering albatross and Amsterdam albatross, numbers remain so low (less than 10 and 15 breeding pairs each year, respectively) that they remain threatened with imminent extinction. While individual nations are taking measures to protect albatrosses and petrels, these birds are susceptible to threats throughout their range. Conservation action by one nation acting alone

cannot be effective in conserving highly migratory species such as albatrosses and petrels — clearly international action is required.



Above: HE Mr Anthony Mongalo, High Commissioner for the Republic of South Africa, hands the instrument of ratification to the Honourable Mark Vaile MP, Minister for Trade. The ceremony also marked the entry into force of the agreement.

Below: Black-browed albatross in flight.

Albatrosses and petrels are threatened globally at sea and on land. Direct contact with fishing operations, eating or being entangled in marine debris, pollution, and over-fishing of their prey are major threats. In breeding colonies, they are threatened by predators, habitat damage and competition with other animals for nest space, parasites and disease.

The Agreement's entry into force will allow members to implement an action plan

to protect critical habitat, control non-native species detrimental to albatrosses and petrels, introduce measures to reduce the incidental catch of seabirds in long-line fisheries, and support research into the effective conservation of albatrosses and petrels.

ACAP also recognises that there are existing international instruments that contain some conservation measures relevant to sea birds, for example, the Convention on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources and the Food and Agriculture Organisation's International Plan of Action for reducing incidental catch of birds in longline fisheries.

ACAP is a good example of the way in which cooperative and coordinated working relationships between international instruments can enhance inter-governmental efforts to protect our shared environment.

Australia is currently acting as the Interim Secretariat for the Agreement, and will continue in this role until the first meeting of the parties is held, when the location of the permanent secretariat is determined by the Parties. The Agreement requires that the first meeting of the parties be held with a year of its entry into force.

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KIERAN LAWTON

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based outside Australia. In 1979, The Frost Inquiry recommendations were endorsed by the Fraser Government, which repealed the Whaling Act 1960 and enacted the Whale Protection Act 1980, handing whales policy to the Minister for Science and the Environment (previously the domain of the Minister for Industry).

Australia has since supported the moratorium on commercial whaling and the

establishment of the two existing IWC whale sanctuaries, in the Indian Ocean (established 1979) and the Southern Ocean (1994).

Meanwhile, the South Pacific Whale Sanctuary, first proposed by Australia and New Zealand in 2000, has received majority support in the IWC, but not yet the three-quarter majority required for its establishment. A similar fate has met Brazil's and Argentina's proposed South Atlantic Whale Sanctuary.

At home, the current Australian Government established the Australian Whale Sanctuary: making it illegal to kill, injure or interfere with whales, dolphins or porpoises in 10.8 million square kms of Australian waters.

Twenty-five years after Australia's decision to bring an end to whaling, the Australian Government has reiterated its commitment to protect whales at home, and to pursue a permanent international ban on commercial whaling.