

A range of issues on the protection and hunting of whales were debated at the 56th annual meeting of the International Whaling Commission (IWC) in July 2004.

The meeting, held in Sorrento, Italy, was attended by a record high 57 member governments, including six new members since the last IWC meeting (Belgium, Côte d'Ivoire, Hungary, Mauritania, Suriname and Tuvalu). It was preceded by a Southern Ocean Sanctuary review workshop, the Scientific Committee and other sub-groups, including the new Conservation Committee. Australia was represented at all sessions, with Australian Antarctic Division (AAD) officers from policy and science branches playing integral roles.

Key outcomes of meeting were:

- The global moratorium on commercial whaling (effective since 1985/86) remains in force. The meeting rejected two proposals to allow commercial whaling in Japanese waters: to take 100 minke whales and 150 Bryde's whales per year.
- The assembly agreed to hold a series of meetings over the coming year, on management and regulatory arrangements, should the IWC agree to allow commercial whaling to resume. Discussions will address the nature of a 'revised management scheme' for any future commercial whaling, and related policy and technical issues.
- The Southern Ocean Sanctuary (established in 1994, to protect whales from commercial whaling in waters south of 40°) was reviewed, and remains in force. Japan's proposal to abolish the Sanctuary and to allow an annual take of 2,914 minke whales from Antarctic waters was soundly defeated.

- Both proposals for new whale sanctuaries — in the South Pacific (proposed by Australia and New Zealand) and the South Atlantic (Argentina and Brazil) achieved majority support of a record 26 votes in favour. However, the proposals fell short of the required ¾ majority for the sanctuaries to come into effect.
- The inaugural meeting of the Conservation Committee (established 2003) outlined topics for future work: endangered species and populations; human impacts; habitat protection; whale watching; reporting systems for strandings, entanglements and bycatch; and conservation-related legal and regulatory arrangements.
- The rules governing aboriginal subsistence whaling (conducted in four Northern Hemisphere countries) were modified. These now require national legislation to govern all hunts, ban the take of calves and accompanying whales, and apply the restrictions on the use of products from such hunts equally in all cases.

The Australian Government's policy is to pursue a permanent international ban on commercial whaling and worldwide protection of all cetaceans. This opposition to whaling also applies to so-called 'scientific whaling'. The Government believes that whaling is not required to meet human needs and that whale killing methods involve unacceptable cruelty. The Government pursues its whale policy objectives through diplomatic means, including in international forums — primarily the IWC.

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International Whaling Commission: 56th Annual Meeting

The Southern Ocean Sanctuary to protect whales from commercial whaling in waters south of 40° remains; but proposals for two new sanctuaries in the South Pacific and South Atlantic did not succeed.