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Australia, NZ to study Antarctic whales

By RAY LILLEY

ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

WELLINGTON, New Zealand -- Australia and New Zealand announced Thursday a non-lethal whale research expedition to the Antarctic, a direct challenge to Japan's research program that kills up to 1,000 whales a year.

The six-week expedition, to set sail in a New Zealand ship early next year, will prove that whales can be studied without killing them, the two governments said in a joint statement.

Japan's whale hunt is allowed under international rules as a scientific program, despite a 1986 ban on commercial whaling. Whale meat not used for study is sold for consumption in Japan, which critics say is the real reason for the hunt.

Australia and New Zealand said in the statement they are seeking to reform science management within the International Whaling Commission, which holds its annual meeting in Madeira, Portugal, next week, and end Japan's "so-called scientific whaling."

"This expedition and the ongoing research program will demonstrate to the world that we do not need to kill whales to study and understand them," Australian Environment Minister Peter Garrett said.

Garrett said the expedition, with scientists from both countries, will be the largest international collaborative research project to focus on improving the conservation of whales.

The statement said the expedition would improve understanding of the population structure, abundance, trends, distribution and ecological role of whales in the Southern Ocean. Its results will be used to develop international whale conservation management plans.

Militant environmentalists have clashed with Japan's whaling fleet in recent years to obstruct its whale hunt. Earlier this year, activists from the U.S. group Sea Shepherd Conservation Society had violent confrontations with Japanese ships in the Antarctic.

In the latest Japanese hunt that ended in April, its fleet killed 679 minke whales and one fin whale over five months, below its stated goals of up to 935 minke whales and 50 fin whales.