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Australia to oppose Japan coastal whaling plan

Mon Jun 15, 2009 4:39am EDT

By Rob Taylor

CANBERRA, June 15 (Reuters) - Australia will oppose a compromise deal that would allow Japan to resume coastal whaling in return for scaling back its annual whale hunt near Antarctica, Environment Minister Peter Garrett said on Monday.

An International Whaling Commission (IWC) panel is seeking an agreement at its annual meeting next week to allow Japan to hunt minke whales off its coast in exchange for cutting back its controversial yearly "scientific" hunt.

"Australia and other countries have very serious concerns about this proposal," Garrett said in a speech at the Australian National University in the leadup to the meeting in Madeira, Portugal.

"Australia does not view trying to legitimise scientific whaling or simply shifting the killing of whales from one part of the world to another as solutions to the issues confronting the IWC or as a means to advance whale conservation," he said.

Australia, which has threatened international legal action against Japan, would push at Madeira for scientific whaling to be brought under the umbrella of the IWC, set up in 1946 in an attempt to preserve whale stocks near extinction, Garrett said.

Tokyo unilaterally introduced "scientific" whaling to skirt an IWC worldwide moratorium on commercial whaling in 1986, arguing it had a right to monitor the impact whales had on its fishing industry.

Japan will come under fresh pressure from anti-whaling nations including Britain and the United States in Madeira to abandon what it says is a cherished cultural tradition.

Environmentalists say the annual cull of close to 1,000 whales, some of them endangered species, is camouflage for commercial whaling, with most of the meat from the catch ending up on the dinner table.

Anti-whaling nations are also concerned by warnings from fisheries officials in South Korea that Seoul could consider resuming whaling off its shores if the IWC approves a plan for neighbour Japan to conduct coastal whaling.

Garrett said Canberra was holding open the option of a legal challenge to whaling in an international court, but was first seeking a diplomatic solution with its largest trade partner.

Both countries have exchanged diplomatic barbs over whaling in recent years, with Japan demanding Australia take stronger action to curb the protests of hardline anti-whaling activists, which have led to shipping collisions.

"The government's preference is for a diplomatic solution because we believe that at present greater progress can be made, and more quickly, through the IWC," Garrett said.

"We do not rule out the use of legal options if, at the end of the day, Japan does not join us."
(Editing by Dean Yates)