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International whaling summit ends in disarray

International Whaling Commission's annual conference in Madeira ends in stalemate, with outgoing chairman suggesting the species could be better protected by lifting the ban on commercial whaling

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Article history

International talks on the future of whaling ended in shambles last night, with no deal between pro- and anti-whaling nations, and the outgoing whaling commission chairman suggesting more whales could be saved if the ban on commercial whaling was lifted.

The International Whaling Commission (IWC)'s yearly conference ended in Madeira, Portugal, a day ahead of schedule with no agreement reached on any of the issues on the table. Instead participants agreed to continue discussions for another year.

Environmentalists called the meeting a "missed opportunity".

"It's been yet another year of talks," said Willie Mackenzie, oceans campaigner at Greenpeace. "It has been a frustrating time of not much happening. And in the meantime, whaling continues."

Immediately after the conference, the outgoing IWC chairman suggested that whale conservation could be better served by lifting the 1986 moratorium protecting whales from extinction. "I'll probably get in trouble for making this statement, but I am probably convinced right now that there would be less whales killed if we didn't have the commercial moratorium," Dr William Hogarth told BBC News.

He suggested that a regulated hunt would be better than currently unregulated "scientific" whaling conducted by Japan. "I'm not sure you'd need nearly so many whales if it were strictly for sustainable use," Hogarth said.

One glimmer of hope for conservationists was the announcement that in Norway, whalers were asked to suspend their hunt mid-season because demand for whale meat has already been fulfilled. The Nordic country caught less than half of its annual quota of 855 minke whales, already reduced from last year's quota of 1,052.

"This confirms that Norwegian whaling continues in a falling market. Nobody wants the whale meat," said Truls Gulowsen at Greenpeace Norway. This industry is about to die. It's only a matter of time before it disappears.

Japanese whaling was always going to be a major sticking point on the IWC agenda in Madeira. Prior to the meeting, the Asian nation had been offered a deal whereby it would be allowed to conduct small-scale coastal whaling in its territorial waters and for its own consumption. Today Japan hunts more than 1,000 animals every year, essentially in the southern Pacific Ocean. But IWC participants could not come to an agreement.

The impasse left the IWC's incoming chair questioning the organisation's role. "We have to re-establish a consensus on what the IWC is and should do, and there are at least two contradictory perceptions to answer that question," said Cristian Maquieira, who was elected this week

The IWC was also supposed to answer a request by the Danish government to hunt 50 humpback whales. Copenhagen made the request on behalf of its autonomous territory of Greenland, where Inuit people are allowed to hunt whales for subsistence. But that issue was also left unresolved.

Joji Morishita, a senior official with the Japanese delegation, said the commission should approve limited commercial whaling by next year, adding: "Without that... the future of the IWC is seriously in doubt." But, environmentalists downplayed the Japanese threat. "Japan has invested a lot of money and diplomatic efforts with the IWC so I don't think they will walk out," said Mackenzie.