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THE IWC - MODERNISATION TO AVOID EXTINCTION

The Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) Whales Working Group is composed of Non-Governmental Organisations with a range of concerns. These include organisations whose mandate relates purely to conservation issues, organisations whose mandate relates purely to welfare issues and organisations that are concerned about both conservation and welfare. Where joint documents include statements on issues relating to whale welfare these do not necessarily represent the views of all groups.

The announcement at the IWC's 59th meeting that the Baiji has become functionally extinct should serve as a signpost to the Commission of where its future lies. The fate of the Vaquita now hangs in the balance and the same is known or suspected for many other cetacean populations. The IWC must be modernised and the pace of that modernisation must outstrip the pace of extinction.

Over the last decades, meetings of the IWC have been dominated by sterile and unproductive discussions on commercial whaling - a goal upon which the Commission is deeply divided. Instead of continuing down this path the IWC should turn from it and adopt conservation as its primary focus, in order to address the recovery of threatened and endangered populations of cetaceans and ensure that no further populations of cetaceans are put at risk. In addition the IWC should acknowledge that there is no humane way to kill a whale at sea and should, therefore, commit to protecting the welfare of these animals by recognising that current killing methods are inhumane. The future of the IWC involves moving its primary focus from exploitation of cetaceans to their conservation and protection.

The once thriving cetacean populations of the world have been reduced largely to remnants in a couple of centuries. Some are on the verge of extinction, such as the Western Grey whale, Northern Right and the Vaquita. Most of those that are recovering remain well below their pre-commercial hunting levels. In addition, whale populations are increasingly impacted by a variety of direct and indirect threats including climate change, noise pollution, ship strikes, toxic pollution, habitat destruction and entanglement.

It remains very difficult to define specific cetacean populations and to assess the populations, many of which are highly mobile or migratory. This non-lethal scientific work, combined with the generation of robust population estimates, remains a core activity which the IWC Scientific Committee is uniquely well-qualified to conduct and expand. The expanded role of the Scientific Committee's activities would be to conduct studies related to non-whaling impacts on whales and thus lead to improved understanding of the implications of environmental threats and the role of cetaceans in ocean ecosystems.

With all of these pressures on the cetaceans any attempt to hunt these long-lived, slow-breeding populations is irresponsible. The mandate of the IWC includes whale watching, which was re-confirmed at the 59th meeting of the Commission as a way of using whales which is far more acceptable to the great majority of countries. Whale watching is of increasing economic importance to a growing number of people and coastal communities worldwide and is the only humane and sustainable use of whales.

Instead of developing rules and models for commercial whaling the Commission must now take steps to ensure that existing whaling for commercial purposes is ended and turn to conservation of cetaceans.

This document is supported by the following organisations:

- Campaign Whale
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