



# The role of IWC in meeting the UK's national and international nature commitments

23<sup>rd</sup> March 2026

This briefing on behalf of nature and animal welfare coalition Wildlife and Countryside Link ([Link](#)) explores how the UK's continued strong support of the International Whaling Commission (IWC) will help it achieve its national and international nature commitments.

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## Introduction to the IWC

With the UK as a founding signatory, the International Whaling Commission (IWC) was established in 1946 as the management body of the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling (ICRW). Hosted in the UK, the IWC has grown from a small resource-management organisation into a respected multilateral environmental agreement of 89 members.<sup>1</sup> In the 40 years since commercial whaling ended in all but three nations, the expertise and mandate of the IWC has evolved from its original exclusive focus on regulating commercial whaling of large whales to implementing management, conservation and welfare measures affecting all cetaceans, including dolphins and porpoises. The UK, which [strongly opposes commercial whaling](#) continues to play a leadership role in this evolution.

Although the IWC continues to regulate subsistence whaling by indigenous groups with a longstanding nutritional and cultural need (Aboriginal Subsistence Whaling), in 1982 it made the visionary decision (co-proposed by the UK) to prohibit commercial whaling worldwide. This averted the extinction of several species in precipitous decline due to overhunting. The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) responded in 1983 with a ban on international trade in the products of the great whales. As a result of these protections, some whale populations have recovered, but many are still far from pre-exploitation levels. The bans on commercial whaling and international trade, and the IWC's more recent work to mitigate man-made threats to cetaceans, remain critical to ensure that whales, dolphins and porpoises have the best chance of recovery and fulfilling their vital ecosystem roles.

## The IWC at 80: research, management, conservation and welfare

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<sup>1</sup> Wold, Chris, Legal Opinion Concerning Japan's Duty to Cooperate with the International Whaling Commission with Respect to Any Resumption of Commercial Whaling (April 26, 2019). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3410248> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3410248>



The IWC’s Scientific Committee, currently chaired by the UK, is the world’s pre-eminent scientific body of knowledge on cetacean abundance, distribution, biology, ecology, behaviour, communication, social dynamics, and culture. It researches at-risk species and populations, assesses population status, and reviews and commissions research to predict and quantify the global, regional and individual impacts on cetaceans from threats including climate change, habitat degradation, plastics and other marine debris, bycatch and entanglements, chemical and noise pollution, and vessel strikes.

The Conservation Committee, also currently chaired by the UK, provides practical advice on mitigating these threats, including to member governments and other international organizations, including the Food and Agriculture Organisation, International Maritime Organisation, Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Animals (CMS) and various Regional Fisheries Management Organizations. The Conservation Committee’s main outputs are threat-specific Mitigation Initiatives, and species-specific Conservation Management Plans (CMPs) – flexible management tools that provide a framework for states to work together to protect cetaceans from the array of threats they face and rebuild their populations.

Current IWC conservation efforts include:

- The IWC’s [Bycatch Mitigation Initiative](#), which develops, assesses and promotes effective bycatch prevention and mitigation measures worldwide;
- The [Whale Watching Handbook](#) on best practice for sustainable whale watching;
- Work on [Marine Debris](#), including capacity building for member governments on responding to whale entanglement, and work on threats from plastic pollution;
- A [strategic plan](#) for tackling the impact of vessel strikes on cetaceans.

The IWC also plays a unique and crucial global [role](#) in ensuring that the pain and suffering of cetaceans in both hunting and non-hunting situations, is understood and minimised. For example, it provides advice on euthanasia and dealing with stranded whales, as well as training on disentanglement from fishing gear. An important new IWC mechanism, championed by the UK, is the [welfare assessment tool](#) that is used to undertake systematic and structured assessments of nutrition, environment, health, behaviour and mental state.

In recent years, the IWC has extended its management advice to the non-lethal uses of cetaceans, including whale watching and the management of sanctuaries. It also considers the significant ecological and economic value of non-use of living cetaceans. In particular, the IWC considers the contribution that cetaceans make to vital ecological functions,



including carbon sequestration and ocean productivity. It promotes the need to take the ecological and economic value of these services into account in decision-making.

### The role of the UK in ensuring the future of the IWC

As summarised in a [recent paper](#) by over 30 UK and international NGOs, the IWC is “*the only international organisation with the mandate, membership, and competence to regulate whaling of all kinds in “all waters” and the dedicated expertise to understand and mitigate threats to cetaceans and promote the value of their non-consumptive use.*” However, the IWC will only remain effective and able to implement its ambitious 10-year strategic plan to address six priority threats - vessel strikes, marine debris, bycatch, anthropogenic sound, chemical pollution, and climate change - if its member governments meet their annual financial commitments, fully engage in the IWC’s biennial meetings, and take direct action to tackle the triple marine emergency of biodiversity loss, pollution and climate change.

The UK plays a critical role in ensuring the IWC remains fit for purpose and at the centre of global efforts to conserve cetaceans:

- **Governance:** A working group on operational effectiveness, co-led by the UK, is ensuring that the IWC’s governance arrangements (such as rules to encourage the repayment of arrears) are consistent with global best practice.
- **Financial:** As the host nation of the IWC, the UK provides generous financial support towards the operations of the Secretariat. In addition to its annual membership fee, it also donates to multiple voluntary funds that ensure conservation and welfare initiatives have consistent funding.
- **Technical:** The UK leads the Scientific and Conservation Committees, the Working Group on Operational Effectiveness and the Intersessional Working Group on Welfare.
- **Leadership:** The UK is a leader in the like-minded group of countries that oppose commercial whaling and support the IWC’s conservation and welfare mandates.

### The role of the IWC in achieving the UK’s domestic and international conservation commitments

As the planet, and particularly its ocean, faces an unprecedented environmental crisis, the IWC’s management and conservation of cetaceans – the apex predators, engineers and sentinels of ocean health – will be increasingly critical. In return, protection and recovery of cetacean populations will help the UK meet its international and domestic environment commitments, including:

- Implementing the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework Target 4 to “Halt Species Extinction, Protect Genetic Diversity, and Manage Human-Wildlife Conflicts”;



- Implementing SDG14 to “conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development”;
- Contributing to 30by30 through domestic marine protected areas and the IWC’s Indian Ocean and Southern Ocean whale sanctuaries;
- Implementing the goals of the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Agreement to protect marine biodiversity on the high seas;
- Achieving the Environment Act target to restore 70% of designated features in UK Marine Protected Areas to a favourable condition by 2042;
- Implementing the IMO [Guidelines](#) on reducing underwater noise from shipping;
- Implementing the CITES Appendix I ban in trade of great whales by intercepting illegal trade in whale products, and prohibiting transit of whale meat via UK ports;
- Implementing cetacean conservation measures under the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species and its daughter agreements including ASCOBANS;
- Achieving Good Environmental Status (GES) for UK seas, as set out in the Marine Strategy Regulations 2010.

### Next steps

The IWC celebrates its 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary, 70<sup>th</sup> meeting and the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the commercial whaling moratorium coming into force in 2026. With the recent entry into force of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction (the “BBNJ Agreement”) the work of the IWC has never been more relevant.

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Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is the largest nature coalition in England, bringing together 94 organisations to use their joint voice for the protection of the natural world and animals.

For questions or further information please contact:

Tom Ash, Senior Policy Officer, Wildlife and Countryside Link E: [tom@wcl.org.uk](mailto:tom@wcl.org.uk)

Wildlife & Countryside Link, Vox Studios, 1 – 45 Durham Street, Vauxhall, London, SE11 5JH

[www.wcl.org.uk](http://www.wcl.org.uk)

This briefing is supported by the following organisations:

Animals Welfare Institute

Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA)

IFAW



OceanCare

ORCA

Seal Research Trust

Whale and Dolphin Conservation (WDC)