

Press Release

Whale conservation in dire straits, International Whaling Commission at the crossroads – NGO Vision Paper on the IWC’s 75th anniversary

Wädenswil/Washington D.C., 2nd December 2021. The International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling celebrates its 75th anniversary today, 2nd of December 2021. However, the state of affairs is sobering: In the 20th century alone, almost three million great whales were killed in commercial whaling operations. While commercial hunts for great whales have been banned since 1986, many other threats prevail and the pressure on the marine habitats is ever increasing. Today, 60 out of 90 cetacean species are considered critically endangered, endangered or vulnerable.

The relevant body, the International Whaling Commission (IWC) is now at the crossroads. Substantial achievements such as the international ban on commercial whaling are contrasted by structural deficits, gaping budgets, unresolved questions of competence as well as a lack of compliance and implementation of decisions. “The International Whaling Commission is not fit for the future,” the marine conservation organisation OceanCare is sounding the alarm. “While the pro-whaling side has a clear agenda on the IWC’s future, a European vision for the future of international cetacean conservation and ambitious diplomatic initiatives are missing,” says Fabienne McLellan, co-lead of the animal and species conservation programme at OceanCare.

Together with 50 international associations, OceanCare, holding Special Consultative Status with the UN and active within the IWC for almost thirty years, presents a Vision Paper on the IWC’s 75th anniversary. The reform package “A 50 YEAR VISION FOR THE IWC” is lighting a torch for a strong position of the IWC in the coming five decades.

At the 75th anniversary of the IWC: cetacean conservation in dire straits

Commercial whaling in the 20th century was the largest cull of any animal order – in terms of total ‘biomass’ – in human history. The large-scale decimation of these apex predators has likely altered the structure and function of the entire ocean. Even after it was apparent that whale populations had been decimated, whaling continued for decades until the international community – by a large majority and in the wake of a growing cetacean conservation movement – made a visionary decision at the 1982 meeting of the IWC: a global ban on commercial whaling which entered into force in 1986. This so-called moratorium saved the lives of hundreds of thousands of whales and remains today one of the greatest conservation achievements of our time.

The aftermath of this 20th century massacre is still felt by these slowly reproducing marine mammals. On top of this, many other threats including noise, plastic and chemical pollution, fisheries bycatch, habitat degradation, collisions with vessels and the wide-ranging impacts caused by climate change put severe pressure on cetaceans. The threats are diverse and conservation action is increasingly complex.

Engineers of vital marine ecosystems: cetaceans enhance our planet’s resilience

We are only now starting to comprehend the importance of the ecosystem services that the whales once provided and could do so again if we protect them properly and allow populations to fully recover. “It is bitterly ironic that the primary threat to their recovery is climate change – the very threat they could help mitigate,” says McLellan.

“A 50 YEAR VISION FOR THE IWC” – Civil society’s call for resolute reform

Determined action for cetaceans and for the oceans’ future is long overdue. “The first thing is to immediately end the anachronistic practice of direct hunts for both great whales and small cetaceans – this requires nothing more than political will,” says Nicolas Entrup, co-director international relations at OceanCare.

Further, the reform package, which is supported by more than 50 international conservation and animal welfare organisations, provides clear guidance to uphold the moratorium, to draw a clear-cut line between aboriginal subsistence whaling and commercial whaling, to strengthen conservation action and to secure its funding.

Living up to these challenges requires substantial reform of the competent IWC body, including commitment to a stable and ambitious budget. At present, the budget is unsecured and there is dispute about structural reforms and about whether the IWC also has competency to regulate small whale species, including dolphins and porpoises, which are killed by the tens of thousands every year. Like with most other conservation agreements, one main problem within the IWC is lacking implementation of its decisions. On top of this, the forum is being undermined by Japan and its allies, which try to prevent any successful reform, while those countries, which always opposed a legalisation of commercial whaling, are widely empty-handed. A vision of pro-conservation countries for the future of the IWC and appropriate diplomatic initiatives are missing. “The European Union’s IWC members are now called upon to redefine the IWC and its course in the 21st century, and to make it fit for today’s challenges,” Entrup demands.

The Commission receives a clear call on its 75th anniversary from more than 50 NGOs, including OceanCare, which has been participating as an observer in IWC conferences since 1992. The NGO paper “[A 50 YEAR VISION FOR THE IWC](#)” is presenting reforms that promise traction and profile for a future IWC. It was officially launched during the anniversary week on 30 November.

Media contacts

OceanCare has been participating in IWC conferences for almost three decades. Its experts have a combined expertise of about 75 years on this issue. The following OceanCare experts are available for interviews:

- Sigrid Lüber, founder and president, participated in IWC conferences from 1992 to 2014
- Nicolas Entrup, co-director international relations, has more than 20 years of experience with the IWC
- Mark P. Simmonds OBE, director of science, has been a member of the IWC’s Scientific Committee for more than 25 years
- Fabienne McLellan, co-director international relations, has been participating in the IWC since 2016

Further information

- Website on the NGO Vision Document and celebrations of the 75th anniversary:
<https://iwc50yearvision.org/>
- Recording of the Launch Event on 30th November:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=db48Oa3yLXg>



- Link to the join NGO Vision Document: <https://iwc50yearvision.org/documents/IWC-50-Year-Vision-English.pdf>

About OceanCare

OceanCare has been working for marine wildlife and ocean protection since 1989. In July 2011 the organisation has been granted Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. OceanCare has been an observer at the IWC since 1992 and is very familiar with the people and rules within this forum. OceanCare published studies on the health risks associated with cetacean meat consumption, thereby initiating cooperation between the IWC and the WHO. We stirred debate on Japanese vote buying, which led to a ban on so-called incentive gifts ("fisheries aid"), and worked to improve civil society participation within the IWC by defining clear rights and duties of NGOs. www.oceancare.org