



American Cetacean Society Conservation Committee Report

Conservation Report - February 2002

compiled by Bonnie Gretz, Conservation Chair

NEW CANADIAN WHALE WATCH REGULATIONS

The Canadian Department of Fisheries and Oceans wants to pass regulations to keep tourists at a respectful distance from whales in Canada's coastal waters and give the giant creatures some peace. Whales can hardly eat, rest or nurse their young without attracting a crush of whale watching operators and curious pleasure boaters. The number of tourists taking to the seas on whale-watching tours soared to nearly 1 million in 1998 from about 185,000 in 1991. "The whale-watching industry is increasing in some places quite drastically," said Brian Wong, DFO's marine mammal co-coordinator. "The existing regulations we have are not adequate."

Off the southern tip of Vancouver Island, pods of killer whales are usually surrounded by about 20 boats in the summer tourist season. On one record-breaking summer day, 107 boats were seen following a single pod of orcas. Although the existing regulations prohibit disturbing whales, there are no specific rules about how many boats can approach a whale, how closely or how quickly.

However, even the whale-watching industry, which brings in about \$50-million annually, realizes it has gone too far, said Jerry Conway, endangered species co-coordinator for the DFO Maritimes region. Dan Kaka, president of the International Whale Watch Operators, Northwest, said although in the past the majority of whale-watch operators opposed formal regulations or licensing, most are now in favor of regulations as long as they are written in consultation with the industry.

It's not known whether hordes of onlookers actually cause any harm to whales. Some studies have shown approaching boats will drive some species out of their preferred home waters. Some whales may stop feeding or nursing, but no studies of long-term effects have been completed.

The DFO is currently accepting comments, with the aim of passing regulations within two years.

Ottawa Citizen/National Post Online

ORCAS TRAPPED IN GREENLAND KILLED

Since New Year's Day, movements of ice in Disco bay, West Greenland, have trapped around 100 orcas and local fishermen and hunters have already killed about 24 animals. There are fears that the slaughter will continue as long as the orcas are trapped.

Shrimp trawlers have shot and killed eight orcas in Qasigiannuit. They were taken to the harbor, flensed and sold on the local market. Eight more orcas have been shot and killed less than 100km away in the vicinity of Aasiaat. The orcas' blubber or "mattak" has been sold to local people despite fears about high level of contaminants. Significant quantities have also been fed to some of the sledge dogs.

The International Whaling Commission (IWC) permits the Danish Home Rule Territory of Greenland to take an annual aboriginal quota of 19 fin whales and over 170 minke whales for local subsistence use. Hunters supplement this quota with large numbers of small cetaceans, including belugas and narwhals. At the forthcoming 54th IWC meeting in May 2002, Denmark will apply for a renewal of Greenland's aboriginal quota. Conservation organizations, led by the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society (WDCS), believe the Commission must closely scrutinize the extent to which Greenland 'tops up' its official quota with hunts of small cetaceans, which are not regulated by the IWC and may be both unsustainable and inhumane. It must also examine whether cetaceans are killed in Greenland, only for local subsistence use.

There is ongoing discussion as to whether the killing of orcas constitutes a violation of the IWC's rules. WDCS believes that orcas are covered by the global moratorium on commercial whaling imposed by the IWC in 1986.

Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society

SAN FRANCISCO RADIOACTIVE WASTE

Over 24 years, the government and private research agencies dumped almost 48,000 55-gallon drums of radioactive waste just a few miles west of the Golden Gate Bridge.

That waste now is leaking into the Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary--and no one knows how much contamination it is causing in seafood. Federal officials say they don't have the money to determine the extent of the damage.

Scientists have studied and mapped only 15% of the disposal site, and the little they did see suggests that most of the radiation leaking from the barrels is not higher than what occurs naturally. Still, environmentalists say more research must be done to gauge the effect on the area's rich marine life.

The marine sanctuary surrounds the Farallon Islands, themselves a national wildlife refuge, and protects 1,225 square miles of ocean. The area is home to 36 species of marine mammals, and teems with so much sea life that albatrosses have been known to fly 5,000-mile round trips from Midway Island and back to feed themselves and their young on what they gathered at the Farallones. Commercial and sport fishermen also harvest a variety of deep sea and shallow water fish there.

Only limited testing has been done on sediment and ground fish at the dump site, and no agency has budgeted closer looks at the problem, said sanctuary manager Edward Ueber.

Worried residents and environmentalists hope an ongoing National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration review of the sanctuary's management plan will

address monitoring of the dump site. Most agree that cleaning the area could make things worse. Some of the drums were sunk with bullet holes, and most are so corroded that moving them would spread more radioactive waste. Two other primary radioactive waste dump sites for the United States, located about 120 miles off the coast of Maryland and Delaware, were also used before the Ocean Dumping Act banned such dumping in 1972.

In the early 1990s, a survey was done from a submarine and unmanned submersibles mapped the barrels. The USGS study concluded that leakage raised radiation levels only slightly in nearby sediments. A 1991 survey by NOAA and the Environmental Protection Agency also found only low-level radiation. "A big concern is that there was so much dumping in the '50s, and is it continuing to have problems?" said Janet Hashimoto, of the EPA's regional office in San Francisco. "All of the balances indicated that there was very low radiation, and sometimes, it was at background level."

Most of the commercial fish harvested in the region--Pacific herring, salmon, rockfish, albacore tuna and Dungeness crab--live at depths shallower than the nearby drums, and government tests on seafood every few years have not shown cause for alarm, said Zeke Grader, executive director of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Assn.

However, elevated radiation levels have shown up in Dover sole and some other deep-sea fish that people eat, according to a study published in 1996 by Thomas Suchanek, then a research ecologist with UC Davis. To see just how far the radioactivity has spread, more testing should be done on organisms that live their entire lives near the barrels, said Suchanek, now a deputy director of environmental contaminants with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Though a USGS study concluded that currents probably won't carry contaminants through the Golden Gate and into the bay, some Bay Area residents want more monitoring to make sure the radioactivity isn't entering the food chain or washing onto Northern California's beaches.

Los Angeles Times

NORWAY RAISES WHALING QUOTA TO PREPARE FOR EXPORT

Norway raised its whaling quota for 2002 on Wednesday, saying it was ready to start exports of whale meat and blubber to Japan. Oslo, which lifted a self-imposed ban on exports of whale products last year, said the whaling quota for this year had been set at 674 minke whales, compared with 549 last year. "The whaling quota is set within the interval recommended to maintain full safety considering the protection of the minke whale population," Fisheries Minister Svein Ludvigsen said in a statement.

Norway, which has a long tradition of hunting minke whales with harpoons, stopped whaling in the mid-1980s in line with a ban by the International Whaling Commission (IWC).

But arguing that the stock was plentiful, it resumed commercial whaling in 1993 despite a global moratorium by the IWC and protests from environmental groups. It lifted the ban on whale meat and blubber exports in January 2001. "Exports have not started yet, but we are ready to start exporting as soon as the import country is ready," a Fisheries Ministry official said. Norway's most likely trading partner for whaling products, Japan, has yet to open for imports. In preparation for trade, the two countries have agreed to standardize their respective databases on whale DNA to prevent smuggling.

In Norway, where whale used to be a common and cheap dinner, whale meat is now sold raw in sushi restaurants, fresh at fish markets and in supermarkets around the country.

The blubber, spurned by Norwegians, is frozen for export, most likely to Japan, where the outer fat of the minke whale is considered a healthy delicacy.

Regular International

NEW DOLPHINARIUM IN CHILE

The Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society (WDCS) reports that the construction of a new dolphinarium is underway in Iquique, Chile and that the project proposes to hold six bottlenose dolphins and six sea lions.

It reportedly includes the capture of dolphins off the coast of Iquique and would open the first dolphin capture operation in Chile since 1983. According to the newspaper "Diario El Nortino", permits to capture the dolphins have been awarded by Chile's National Fisheries Service SERNAP.

Surveys or assessments of dolphin populations off the almost the entire Chilean coast are non-existent.

In 1995, two dolphins were imported to Iquique from Cuba for public display. Within a few weeks, one of the dolphins died. With worsening conditions at the facility, the remaining dolphin was returned to Cuba in 1997 to enter a rehab program pending release to the wild, but he died in 1998 before he could be released.

In 1999, the Chilean authorities prevented the import of three dolphins to Santiago for a captive facility.

The Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society is requesting letters to the Chilean Fisheries, asking if these reports are true, and to not permit any importation of dolphins or sea lions.

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Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society

WHALES CAUGHT NEAR JAPAN CONTAMINATED WITH MERCURY

High levels of mercury were found in the meat of five sperm whales caught in the sea near Japan, preventing the meat from being sold to consumers, research institute officials said Saturday.

More than three times the level of mercury allowed by the government was detected in the meat of the whales caught as a part of Japan's research whaling in the northwestern Pacific Ocean in fiscal 2000, officials of the government-commissioned Institute of Cetacean Research said. As a result, the approximately 16-tons of meat were frozen and preserved instead of being shipped to markets, they said, adding it was the first time that whale meat could not be shipped for consumption due to high-mercury levels.

According to the Tokyo-based organization, 40 minke whales, five sperm whales and 43 Bryde's whales were captured as part of Japanese scientific whaling in the northwestern Pacific Ocean in fiscal 2000.

A private research institute in Ehime Prefecture, commissioned by the institute to analyze the whale meat, found the average mercury level in the sperm whale meat was about 1.47 ppm, far exceeding the provisionally set environmental standard of 0.4 ppm, while the figure in the minke whale meat was only 0.21 ppm.

Japan targeted minke whales as part of its research whaling in the northwestern Pacific Ocean from fiscal 1999, and included sperm whales and Bryde's whales from fiscal 2000. The International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling stipulates that all possible efforts should be taken to process the meat of whales

caught for scientific purposes for consumption.

Kyodo News

NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES (NMFS) TURNS DOWN NORTHERN RIGHT WHALE REVISION PETITION

On October 13, 2000, NMFS received a petition dated October 4, 2000, requesting that NMFS revise the present critical habitat designation for the northern right whale under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) by designating a new area within the eastern Bering Sea as critical habitat for right whales in the North Pacific. NMFS has determined that the petition is not warranted at this time. NMFS recognizes that the revision of critical habitat may be prudent, but finds that the extent of critical habitat cannot be determined at this time because the essential biological requirements of the population in the North Pacific Ocean are not sufficiently understood. NMFS will continue to analyze issues raised by the petition following the completion of planned 2002 right whale surveys and research.

Federal Register

COMPLETE COLLAPSE OF NORTH ATLANTIC FISHERIES PREDICTED

The entire North Atlantic is being so severely over fished that it may completely collapse by 2010, reveals the first comprehensive survey of the entire ocean's fishery. Putting a new ocean-wide management plan into place is the only way to reverse the trend, says Reg Watson, fisheries scientist at the University of British Columbia.

North Atlantic catches have fallen by half since 1950, despite a tripling of the effort put into catching them. The total number of fish in the ocean has fallen even further, with just one sixth as many high-quality table fish like cod and tuna as there were in 1900. Fish prices have risen six fold in real terms in 50 years. The shortage of table fish has forced a switch to other species such as sea cucumber, repulsive by earlier standards.

According to experts, the only hope for the fishery is to drastically limit fishing,

for example by declaring large portions of the ocean off-limits and at the same time reducing the number of fishing ships. Piecemeal efforts to protect certain fisheries have only caused fishing fleets to over fish elsewhere, such as West Africa. Normally, falling catches would drive some fishers out of business. But government subsidies actually encourage over fishing. Subsidies total about \$2.5 billion a year in the North Atlantic.

Many experts are skeptical that any international fishing agreements currently on the table will turn the tide in a short enough timescale. The UN's Food and Agriculture Organization and the OECD have initiatives but these are voluntary. A UN backed monitoring and enforcement plan of action is being discussed but could take 10 years to be enforced. These experts say only a public reaction like that against whaling in the 1970s would be enough to bring about sufficient change in the way fish stocks are managed.

The new survey was presented at the American Association for the Advancement of Science's 2002 annual meeting in Boston.

New Scientist 2002

PORTUGAL PRAISED FOR REFUSING IMPORT OF WILD DOLPHINS

An application to import ten wild-captured bottlenose dolphins from Guinea-Bissau (West Africa) into Portugal for public display at the Lisbon Zoo has been refused by the Portuguese authorities to CITES (Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora). This move has been praised by a coalition of animal welfare groups and conservationists including the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society (WDCS), the Born Free Foundation, Eurogroup for Animal Welfare and the Bellerive Foundation.

International trade in bottlenose dolphins is strictly controlled by CITES and they can only be imported into the European Union for very exceptional reasons. Nevertheless, they continue to be captured from the wild and imported into the EU for public display. As well as presenting a serious risk to the

welfare and survival of the animals captured and taken into captivity, such removals can have serious implications for the continued viability of the wild populations targeted.

The coalition continues to call on the Portuguese authorities to refuse an application by Zoomarine, another captive facility in Portugal, to import wild-caught dolphins from Cuba.

Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society

ACOUSTIC THERMOMETRY OF OCEAN CLIMATE PROJECT STARTS UP AGAIN

An experiment to study ocean temperatures with sound transmissions over long distances has resumed about eight miles north of Kauai, Hawaiian Islands. The Scripps Institution of Oceanography's North Pacific Acoustic laboratory received final approval from the Navy on Jan. 23 for the Acoustic Thermometry of Ocean Climate (ATOC) Project.

The first acoustic transmission occurred Jan. 24. Testing generally will be done every four days, with six 20-minute transmissions in one day. The project has aroused concerns about effects of the underwater sounds on humpback whales. But scientists who participated in two years of preliminary experiments found no significant effects on whales or other species when sounds were transmitted, University of Hawaii professor Joe Mobley has reported. Aerial surveys to study the distribution and abundance of humpbacks and other marine life in the vicinity of the sound sources when ATOC is working were to be done soon after the tests started. Among other goals, the five-year project is studying the feasibility and value of large-scale acoustic thermometry, the behavior of sound transmissions in the ocean and possible long-term effects on marine life.

Honolulu Star Bulletin

DNA BREAKTHROUGH IN AUSTRALIA CHALLENGES JAPAN'S CLAIMS

A breakthrough by Australian scientists will add more weight to contesting Japan's long disputed claim that it has to kill whales in order to study them. The

scientists have developed a method of determining the stomach contents of whales using DNA of bodily waste. The data collected tell the scientists what the whales have consumed and even what intestinal parasites they carry. They said the DNA method and tested on blue whale feces made it possible to identify prey species such as krill, and possibly their sex.

Andrew Darby, Hobart, Australia

30% OF WHOLESALE WHALE MEAT NOT SOLD IN JAPAN

Demand for minke whale meat products fell last summer at the wholesale level as about 30 percent of stocks remained on the shelves, reflecting reduced demand for the expensive delicacy during the economic slump, according to data made available recently by a private research institute. It is the first time that wholesale markets did not sell their entire whale meat since Japan resumed its "research hunting" of whales in fiscal 1987.

According to the Institute of Cetacean Research, Japan caught 440 minke whales in the Antarctic Ocean in fiscal 2000. Wholesale markets put 725 tons of meat on sale from July through August, but around 220 tons remained as of the end of August. One of the factors contributing to the poor sales was that whale meat prices were much higher than those for other fisheries products, which have fallen recently, institute officials said.

Japan Times

TUNISIA RATIFIES ACCOBAMS

Tunisia recently became the 9th member state to ratify ACCOBAMS, the Agreement on the conservation of Cetaceans in the Black Sea, Mediterranean Sea, and Contiguous Atlantic area.

Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society

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