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Whales do not compete with humans for fish, says study

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By Robin Pomero, Reuters

SORRENTO, Italy — Whales and dolphins are not depleting the world's fish stocks despite the sea mammals' enormous appetites, according to a scientific study unveiled at the International Whaling Commission (IWC) conference on Monday.

The study, partly funded by U.S.-based group Humane Society International, counters arguments put forward by pro-whaling nations that whales, protected under international law, devour valuable fish stocks that could be used to feed humans.

Some whaling countries like Japan, Norway, and Iceland, have suggested controlled killing of such animals would help reduce the growing strain on the fishing industry.

"The bottom line is that humans and whales and other mammals can co-exist; there's no need to wage war on them," said Daniel Pauly, professor of fisheries at the University of British Columbia in Canada and co-author of the report. "There is certainly no need to blame marine mammals for the collapse of fisheries."

Cetaceans — a category of sea creatures that includes whales and dolphins — and other sea mammals like seals, consume vast quantities of food, an estimated 500 million tons, at least four times the annual human catch of fish.

But the report by Pauly and his colleague at the Vancouver-based university, Kristin Kaschner, which mapped the globe's fisheries and compared that with the fish consumption of sea mammals, found little overlap between the two.

"About 1 percent of marine mammal consumption overlaps," Kaschner said. "Only about 1 percent of what marine mammals eat is in high conflict areas."

The research found that whales and other species were mainly feeding either in seas where there was little human fishing, such as Arctic and Antarctic zones, or the whales were eating organisms humans do not catch, such as tiny plankton and organisms who live out of reach of trawl nets.

The report acknowledges there are overlaps where marine mammals do feed in important human fishing grounds, but not on a scale that justifies a return to large-scale whaling.

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"Our research clearly shows that these are isolated, regional issues to be addressed at the appropriate scale," the report says.

The IWC convention which began on Monday, pits whaling nations like Japan, Iceland, and Norway against countries trying to maintain and strengthen a 14-year-old global moratorium on commercial whaling.

Source: Reuters

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