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PM - Latest vote will not stop Japan's scientific cull of whales

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PM - Wednesday, 22 June , 2005 18:18:00

Reporter: Mark Colvin

MARK COLVIN: The anti-whaling nations, including Australia, may have won their battle to keep commercial whaling outlawed by the International Whaling Commission, but the vote will have no effect on Japan's so-called scientific cull of minke whales.

But in a motion at the meeting in South Korea, Australia fired another diplomatic shot at Japan, condemning the science of its whaling program as a sham.

The motion passed by 30 votes to 27, but it won't stop Japan from continuing to hunt whales in the name of scientific research.

I asked Patricia Forkan, President of the animal welfare group, Humane Society International, on the phone from Ulsan, what scientific evidence the Japanese had put forward.

PATRICIA FORKAN: Yes, well they did a Powerpoint demonstration that looked the same as other years, where they just showed minke whales with fish in their tummies, and talked about how they now had to manipulate the whole ecosystem in the Antarctic to be able to understand the science.

All the credible scientists, of course, are saying that this is nonsense, it is simple minded, and absolutely have trashed it but the Japanese insist that they must go forward.

MARK COLVIN: So I know I'm asking you to summarise the point of view of your opponent, as it were, but what exactly is their argument about the reason for blowing up whales?

PATRICIA FORKAN: Well, they have a very specious argument. They're saying that whales are eating fish, and that they therefore must be culled, and that is absolute nonsense. The reason the fisheries are collapsing ...

MARK COLVIN: Don't whales eat krill?

PATRICIA FORKAN: They eat krill, and we had a study done last year by Dr Daniel Pauly, who's a world-renowned fisheries biologist. He looked at the overlap of fish and whales, and came out emphatically and said that whales are eating fish where we aren't fishing, and we are fishing where whales aren't eating fish.

MARK COLVIN: You're absolutely certain about that?

PATRICIA FORKAN: Yes. There are of course a few places where they overlap, but it's minimal, and so to use that argument to say we now have to kill humpback whales and fin whales and double the number of minke whales is just simply using science to promote a political point of view.

MARK COLVIN: In interviews with the Japanese scientists on the ABC in the past, they've talked about the need to kill them so as in some way to find out more about their numbers. Did they talk about the numbers?

PATRICIA FORKAN: Well, the numbers really are obtained by visual sightings on cruises. They say the reason they have to kill them is to find out what they're eating. It's my understanding from scientists that the information that's been gathered for not only 20 years or 18 years by their last scientific outing, but years before, we know what they're eating. This is not a mystery and it's not something that needs to require hundreds and hundreds of whales being killed.

MARK COLVIN: But there's presumably a certain feeling of impotence about all this, because while you think that the science is junk science, there's not much you can do about it, is there?

PATRICIA FORKAN: Well, we had a moral victory today by getting a resolution that Australia put forward that passed. It didn't pass by much, but we do have the ability now to go out and say that at least the IWC today has said that this is not science that should go forward.

Japan wanted to get a vote on their resolution saying it was wonderful, but they withdrew it when they saw that they weren't going to get it passed.

They then went ahead and said, and threatened everyone, that next year they would be back with more countries, and they were going to change history next year at the IWC. So we took that as a direct threat that they're going out and diplomatically finding countries – small countries, as you know, like Nauru – to bring in to vote with them.

And so it's not about whales, it's about political might.

MARK COLVIN: And you accuse them, effectively, of direct vote-buying by small countries?

PATRICIA FORKAN: I don't like to call it, I don't like to call it that, because ...

MARK COLVIN: What do you call it?

PATRICIA FORKAN: ... it's ... that's ... very insulting. I think the more appropriate thing is that they're using foreign aid to obtain support in this body.

MARK COLVIN: And finally, do you think they'll win by next year? Do you think they can do it in 12 months?

PATRICIA FORKAN: Several countries that were supposedly going to come in and vote with them - and how they know they're going to vote with them before they come in and vote remains to everyone's imagination - they claim that they will have enough next year to overturn all the conservation, overturn all the welfare, and all the other kinds of advances that we've been able to make over the past 15 years.

MARK COLVIN: Thank you very much, thanks for your time.

PATRICIA FORKAN: Okay, thank you.

MARK COLVIN: Patricia Forkan, President of the animal welfare group, Humane Society International, on the phone from Ulsan in South Korea.

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