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EUROPE

Tuesday, July 20, 2004 · Last updated 5:28 a.m. PT

Whaling meeting gets under way in ItalyBy TRISHA THOMAS
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

SORRENTO, Italy -- Japan lost a bid to have voting held by secret ballot at this week's International Whaling Commission - a blow to a country trying to have a 1986 ban on commercial whaling overturned.

Japan's proposal was rejected 29-24 on Monday in the first decision taken by the IWC gathering in this sea resort in southern Italy. Environmentalists applauded the decision, saying it ensured transparency within the organization.

The meeting opened amid long-standing accusations that Japan, the leading pro-whaling country, is using development aid to buy the votes of smaller nations in its campaign against the commercial whaling ban.

"Some of the poorest developing countries in the world are being used to vote in favor of whaling," said John Frizell of Greenpeace International. "This is a clear case of 'money talks' and it's happening in front of us. It is time we put a stop to this ongoing vote buying, before it's too late."

The pro-whaling bloc has grown steadily over the past years. The WWF said the bloc has gone from nine in the year 2000 to 21 in 2003, and forecast this year it would total 27.

Greenpeace lists Suriname, Tuvalu, Mauritania and Ivory Coast as recent additions to the pro-whaling bloc, while WWF singles out Mongolia, a country that does not have a coastline.

Japan denied the accusation, saying in a statement that it has "fisheries relationships" with many nations around the world. "When we have a chance to discuss the IWC situation with those nations, they are often more prepared to understand our position," a delegation statement said.



A Greenpeace sail boats with anti-whaling sails and banners parades with other sailboats in the Sorrento Gulf, near Naples, Italy, Sunday July 18, 2004. Greenpeace supporters and whaling opponents gathered in Sorrento to proterst against the International Whaling commission meeting scheduled to take place in Sorrento from July 18 until July 22, 2004. (AP Photo/ Alessandra Tarantino)

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Attention at the gathering was focused once again on the 1986 ban on commercial whaling. However, with a three-fourths majority required to overturn the moratorium, Japan and other pro-whaling countries are not optimistic.

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"The anti-whaling nations simply don't want to lift the moratorium, and as they have enough votes to block any lifting, the ban will stay in place," said the High North Alliance, which gathers hunters from Canada, Iceland, Norway and other countries.

The High North Alliance says there is enough scientific evidence that several whale stocks can be hunted in a sustainable way, including the minke whales, the smallest of the baleen whales at about 30 feet.

Japan and other countries also say that whales are overeating fish and that controlled killing of marine mammals would help the fishing industry. "Many of the whale stocks around Japan are increasing and consuming huge quantities of at least 10 species of fish that are caught by our fishermen," according to Japan's opening remarks.

A report presented at the opening of the conference Monday countered that argument. The report said that most food consumed by marine mammals isn't what fisheries target. Further, according to the report, whales consume most of their food in areas where commercial vessels do not fish.

"What whales consume is largely stuff that we do not catch in areas where we do not fish," said Daniel Pauly, a professor at the Fisheries Center, University of British Columbia in Vancouver and one of the experts who wrote the report.

The report, called "Competition between Marine Mammals and Fisheries: Food for Thought," was funded in part by the international arm of The Humane Society of the United States, which is a member of an anti-whaling coalition of over 140 non-governmental organizations called Whalewatch.

Japan, like Iceland, hunts whales for research that is permitted by the commission. Anti-whaling countries say whaling should be discouraged altogether, and insist Japan's research programs are commercial whaling in disguise.

The IWC meeting runs through Thursday.

On the Net:

The IWC is at: www.iwcoffice.org

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