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'Fisheries, not whales behind fish shortage'

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WASHINGTON: Leading conservationists at an International Whaling Commission meet have trashed the argument that whales were behind declining fish stocks.

Humane Society International WWF and Lenfest Ocean Programme on Monday presented three new reports debunking the science behind the 'whales-eat-fish' emanating from Japan, Norway and Iceland.

"It is not the whales, it is over-fishing and excess fishing capacity that are responsible for diminishing supplies of fish in developing countries," fisheries biologist Daniel Pauly, director of the University of British Columbia Fisheries Centre said at the meet in Santiago, Chile.

"Making whales into scapegoats serves only to benefit wealthy whaling nations while harming developing nations by distracting any debate on the real causes of the declines of their fisheries."

The report- "Who's eating all the fish? The food security rationale for culling cetaceans" - co-authored by Dr Pauly for the Humane Society International contrasts "the widely different impacts of fisheries and marine mammals" with fisheries targeting larger fish where available and marine mammals consuming mainly smaller fish and organisms.

With less than half the catch going to domestic markets and the majority "gravitating toward the markets of affluent developed countries, one can speak of fish migrating from the more needy to the less needy", the report says.

Also presented to the IWC Scientific Committee was the preliminary result into analysis of the interaction between whales and commercial fisheries in north west Africa.

The whales spend only a few months in the area during their vast seasonal migrations, eat relatively little while breeding and tend to consume fundamentally different types of food resources than the marine species targeted by both local and foreign fisheries.

Also released were reviews of scientific literature originating from Japan and Norway - the two countries most strongly promoting the idea that whales pose problems for fisheries.

The review, funded by WWF, found significant flaws in much of the science and concluded that "where good data are available, there is no evidence to support the contention that marine mammal predation presents an ecological issue for fisheries".

Susan Lieberman of WWF said "these three reports provide yet more conclusive evidence that whales are not responsible for the degraded state of the world's fisheries, reports *Sciencedaily* .

"It is now time for governments to focus on the real reason for fisheries decline - unsustainable fishing operations."