

Date: 16.10.2022

Opening statement from NOAH - for animal rights at the 68th Meeting of the International Whaling Commission Portorož, Slovenia, 13-21 October 2022

We sincerely thank the Chair, Andrej Bibic, The Secretariat and the government of Slovenia for organizing and hosting IWC68. We look forward to a successful meeting that will improve the conservation status for cetaceans around the world.

The moratorium

This year marks 40 years since the decision by the IWC to implement the whaling moratorium. The moratorium has been one of the most successful international environmental agreements so far in history. The moratorium is an example of how international agreements can truly make a difference and restore nature that has been damaged by humans. It is vital that this agreement is kept in place. First and foremost for the whales, but also to keep the work focused towards conservation, and not backwards towards exploitation. Because of the moratorium whales are protected from harpoons in most parts of the world. But the whales are facing other, severe threats like pollution, climate change and ship strikes, among other things. The oceans are deteriorating, species are going extinct at an alarming rate and the number of wild animals are decreasing. Therefore, it is more important than ever that nations come together and make effective agreements to protect nature. But for the agreements to be effective it is important that all contracting governments comply with them. To comply with the agreements is important for nature, but also to show solidarity with other contracting nations.

Animal welfare and killing methods

Animal welfare and animal ethics is of increasing importance amongst the population of Norway and around the world. A majority of the Norwegian population have concerns about the welfare of whales in Norwegian whaling. This is reflected in a recent survey that showed that in Norway 65 percent believe that it is unacceptable that close to 1 in 5 whales killed in Norwegian whaling do not die immediately, and that some whales take up to 25 minutes to die. For the last 20 years, 71 percent of Norwegian minke whale catches have been female. This has increased to 77 percent in the last five years. Many of the whales that are caught are pregnant. In the survey, 63 percent felt that it is unacceptable.¹

There is no mandatory reporting of times to death (TTD) or instantaneous death rates (IDR) for the Norwegian hunt. The most recent data on TTD in Norwegian whaling is several years old. And this information came from reviews by fisheries inspectors or even the whalers themselves. This runs counter to best practice that data collectors should be independent, designated, competent persons who do not have other tasks to attend to in the killing and flensing of whales. Given these criteria,

¹ Survey conducted by Respons Analyse, from September 3-7, 2021 of 1,037 respondents ranging in age from 18 to 87

the best candidates are veterinarians, large mammal biologists and whale physiologists, with fisheries inspectors being the least recommended. We urge Norway to return to the 100 percent inspection coverage that was maintained many years ago.

Further, the IWC defines humane killing of a whale as “causing its death without pain, stress or distress perceptible to the animal.” But this is not realistic in whaling, given that whales are only visible for a short period when they surface to breathe, the thorax (the initial target) and the brain (the proposed location for a secondary rifle shot when the initial harpoon fails to kill a whale) offer only small, briefly accessible targets for a gunner standing on a moving platform on a shifting sea, often under difficult weather and sea conditions. This also causes some whales to get struck and lost, which is a big welfare concern.

Research and science

The Norwegian Science Committee of Food and Environment published a report on the global population of minke whales in February 2022.² The report came to this conclusion: “Knowledge about minke whales is insufficient, and it is difficult to calculate how large the population is globally, and how it is developing. (...) Minke whales are exposed to collisions with boats, noise and pollution. They end up as bycatch, and get stuck in fishing equipment or rubbish.” We urge to move the focus of research from “How many can we kill?” to a more ecosystem based research that seeks to fill the many knowledge gaps that exist in whale ecology, behavior, migration and so on. Furthermore, a species cannot be reviewed in isolation from other species and the environment. We need to start to view species as an integral part of the ecosystems, and acknowledge that there is still a lot we don’t know.

Whale meat consumption is dwindling and whale meat is used as pet food in Norway

Whale meat consumption is going down in Norway. This is reflected by the previously mentioned survey which showed that only 2 percent in Norway consume whale meat regularly. This is down from 4 percent in 2019. The same poll showed that only 1 percent of women eat whale meat regularly and no one under the age of 35 ate whale meat regularly. To get rid of the whale meat, whale meat is exported to Japan (under the reservation against CITES listing of minke whales in appendix I) and whalers also sell whale meat as dog food. This is completely unacceptable, given the whales’ suffering in the hunt and their important role as ecosystem engineers. This also highlights that whale meat is a niche product with a very small market, and that whaling in Norway is completely unnecessary.

Sanctuaries and conservation

Although Norway’s ministers often claim that Norway wants to be a leading nation in ocean conservation, the truth is that Norway in many areas works against conservation initiatives. Norway has previously voted against the proposal of a South Atlantic Whale Sanctuary on earlier commission meetings. Nationally, less than 10% of the ocean is protected and budgets for conservation are being cut. We hope that our own country will take the opportunity at this commission meeting to change direction towards conservation by voting in favor of a South Atlantic Whale Sanctuary.

² VKM, Eli K. Rueness, Kjersti S. Kvie, Erlend B. Nilsen, Hugo de Boer, Katrine Eldegard, Kjetil Hindar, Lars Robert Hole, Johanna Järnegren, Kyrre Kauserud, Inger Måren, Anders Nielsen, Eva B. Thorstad, Gaute Velle (2022). Compilation of knowledge on the global population of common minke whale (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*). Scientific Opinion of the Panel on Alien organisms and Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). VKM Report 2022:07, ISBN: 978-82-8259-382-3, ISSN: 2535-4019. Norwegian Scientific Committee for Food and Environment (VKM), Oslo, Norway.

Kind regards

NOAH - for dyrs rettigheter

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