Greenpeace Opening Statement
64th International Whaling Commission Meeting, Panama

As the IWC looks to its future, two paths appear possible. The IWC can return to its roots of 65 years ago and focus on the hunting of whales in the hope of doing so without depleting populations. Or it can turn away from that path and modernise itself into a body concerned with the conservation of whales and restoration of endangered and depleted populations as its primary goal.

It is clear that the future of the IWC lies with conservation, not with whaling. The few remaining whaling operations are contracting as the market for whale meat diminishes. The world's whaling industry brings in a few tens of millions of dollar a year; the whale watching industry brings in billions.

We urge all contracting governments to support establishment of the South Atlantic whale sanctuary both as a practical measure to enhance research in the area and as a symbolic measure to show the IWC can rise above its differences to agree conservation measures requested by a majority of its members.

As we look to the future, we should remember the past. The 20th century was a disaster for whales. Attempts at management carried out under the auspices of the IWC were marked by the failure of management plans and the depletions of populations and species.

When the IWC attempted to manage the blue whale, it ignored scientific advice and instead gave in to pressure from the whaling industry. When a ban was agreed, pelagic whaling nations filed objections and carried on hunting the endangered populations. Even after the objections were withdrawn, illegal, unreported takes of blue whales continued.

Despite the clear example of the blue whale the whaling industry, operating under IWC management plans, went on to also deplete first the fin and then the sei whales of the Antarctic, driving the biomass of whales in the Antarctic down to 5-10% of its pristine abundance of just a century before.

Only the moratorium has brought relief from these serial management failures; failures which occurred because the IWC managed whaling for the short term good of the industry, and not the long term good of the whales or the oceans. The moratorium must be continued and commercial whaling brought to an end.

Whales now face threats that were not imagined when the ICRW was negotiated in the 1940s - noise, disease, ship strikes, toxic pollution and ingestion of plastics, entanglement in fishing gear, climate change ocean acidification and even radioactive contamination. Addressing the impacts of these on whales is where the future lies for the IWC. Endangered populations need our help. The western grey whale population may become extinct in this century. The survival of the northern right whale remains in the balance, with ship strikes and net entanglements preventing population recovery. Four years ago the Baiji was declared extinct. The Vaquita and Maui's dolphin are now critically endangered.

The IWC oversaw some of the worst excesses of the whaling era. The 21st century offers us a chance to repair the damage done to cetacean populations worldwide. If the IWC can deliver to the citizens of the 22nd century a worldwide population of whales near pristine abundance, then our descendants can decide how they in turn will steward the oceans and the Commission will have entered history as a farsighted body that rose above initial failure to secure the future of the whales. The first step on that new path should be the creation of the South Atlantic whale sanctuary at this meeting.