

## CARIBBEAN NATIONS TAKE CENTER STAGE AT IWC MEETING

The International Whaling Commission (IWC) is hosting its next meeting in St. Kitts in June 2006. Changing international politics and priorities are reducing the once-prominent role played by countries like the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia in the IWC. New leaders are emerging, particularly from Latin America and the Caribbean. ***At no other time has an informed and engaged Caribbean region been more important to the preservation and protection of whales worldwide.***

### WHY WHALES MATTER

#### *Killing Whales Will Not Help Fisheries*

Supporters of whaling claim that whales may be having a negative impact – causing declines or preventing recovery – on commercially valuable fish species. They argue that whales therefore should be hunted to keep “the balance of nature” intact and provide food security for developing nations. There are numerous problems with this argument. First, there is no “balance of nature” today – due to historic industrial whaling, the number of whales is vastly reduced and if there is competition, it is more likely that commercial fisheries are inhibiting whale recovery through over-fishing of their prey species.

Second, research has shown that whales generally do not eat commercially valuable fish species and do not feed on commercial fishing grounds. In the Caribbean, baleen whales (those species without teeth) do not feed much at all, as they migrate to northern feeding grounds – most baleen whales are breeding in the Caribbean, not feeding. On a global basis, where there is overlap between whale distribution and fisheries, it is more likely that human over-fishing is harming whale populations than the other way around.

#### *Whale Watching Versus Whaling*

Simply put, whales are worth more alive than dead. The Caribbean has enormous potential to develop sustainable whale watching. Several islands, including Dominica and the Dominican Republic, already have active whale watching industries. A viable market for whale meat or other products is questionable, but there is clearly a market for whale watching, as this form of tourism continues to expand globally into a multi-billion dollar industry.

In addition, published surveys of the whale watching public suggest that they are much less likely to visit an area where whaling occurs and are certainly less likely to go whale watching where whaling occurs. Where whaling and whale watching co-exist, the latter suffers and would likely be a more valuable contributor to a region’s economy – some studies suggest well in excess of what whaling can contribute – if whaling stopped. In addition, responsibly conducted whale watching is clearly more sustainable than whaling, as it is non-consumptive. As a long-term economic (and common sense) matter, whale watching has more of a future than whaling.

## **The IWC – What Are the Issues and Their Implications for the Caribbean?**

### *Background: The Whaling Moratorium*

The IWC was set up under the 1946 International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling (ICRW). The ICRW was intended to provide for the proper conservation of whale populations and the regulation of commercial whaling.

For decades following the establishment of the IWC, hundreds of thousands of whales continued to be killed, seriously depleting most whale populations. Underreporting of the number of whales killed was common during that time, and scientists lacked – and to a large degree still lack – accurate assessments of whale population numbers. As a result, in 1982 the IWC passed a moratorium on commercial whaling. ***This moratorium, which went into effect in 1986, remains in place today for two reasons: whale populations have not yet recovered, and there is no effective mechanism in place to safely or humanely regulate the killing of these marine mammals.***

The ban on commercial whaling does not affect aboriginal subsistence whaling, which is permitted by Denmark, the Russian Federation, St. Vincent and the Grenadines and the United States. IWC has also allowed countries to grant permits for “scientific” whaling.

### *Agenda Control and Secret Ballots*

The whaling nation of Japan currently holds a simple majority of votes in the IWC. While this does not give it the power to overturn major IWC regulations, it does give pro-whaling interests control over the meeting agenda. The result is that Japan can see to it that issues of importance to the Caribbean region, such as conservation, sanctuary development, whale watching and animal welfare are off the agenda, so that only those items of interest to pro-whaling nations can be discussed.

Agenda control would also allow Japan to dictate that measures be voted on by secret ballot. This is extremely dangerous as secret ballots destroy any measure of transparency and accountability, which are the foundations of international cooperation under treaty obligations. In the case of the Caribbean countries, which – due to common regional interests and shared whale stocks – often act in concert, secret ballots could mean that one nation could vote against the interests of the region or a neighboring country without the knowledge of the others and without being held accountable.

### *Lethal Scientific Whaling is Unnecessary*

Each year Japan grants whaling permits for “scientific” purposes. However, the IWC Scientific Committee has reviewed Japan’s scientific whaling program and decided that much of the information that is gathered is not necessary for management and that much of the information can be collected with non-lethal techniques.

Lethal research is not necessary to promote an understanding of species distribution, how often a species is seen or a species’ use of its habitat. Photographs of live, stranded or netted whales can document a species’ presence in local waters. Recordings of whale sounds can identify species that may not be easily observed due to their behaviour. Dedicated land, sea or aerial observations can assist in understanding how whales use an area by observing behaviour or looking for the presence of calves or mating groups.

## Whale Species in the Caribbean

The following table lists the whale and dolphin species most likely to be found in the region.

Common Name	Scientific Name	Frequency of occurrence in Caribbean
Atlantic spotted dolphin	<i>Stenella frontalis</i>	Common
Blainville's beaked whale	<i>Mesoplodon densirostris</i>	Common
Bottlenose dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>	Common
Bryde's whale	<i>Balaenoptera edeni</i>	Common
Clymene dolphin	<i>Stenella clymene</i>	Common
Cuvier's beaked whale	<i>Ziphius cavirostris</i>	Common
Dwarf sperm whale	<i>Kogia simus</i>	Common
False killer whale	<i>Pseudorca crassidens</i>	Common
Fraser's dolphin	<i>Lagenodelphis hosei</i>	Common
Gervais' beaked whale	<i>Mesoplodon europaeus</i>	Common
Melon-headed whale	<i>Peponocephala electra</i>	Common
Pantropical spotted dolphin	<i>Stenella attenuata</i>	Common
Pygmy killer whale	<i>Feresa attenuata</i>	Common
Pygmy sperm whale	<i>Kogia breviceps</i>	Common
Risso's dolphin	<i>Grampus griseus</i>	Common
Rough-toothed dolphin	<i>Steno bredanensis</i>	Common
Short-finned pilot whale	<i>Globicephala macrorhynchus</i>	Common
Spinner dolphin	<i>Stenella longirostris</i>	Common
Tucuxi	<i>Sotalia fluviatilis</i>	Common
Humpback whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>	Migratory – common
Sperm whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>	Migratory – common
Blue whale	<i>Balaenoptera musculus</i>	Migratory – occasional
Common minke whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>	Migratory – occasional
Fin whale	<i>Balaenoptera physalus</i>	Migratory – occasional
North Atlantic right whale	<i>Eubalaena glacialis</i>	Migratory – occasional
Sei whale	<i>Balaenoptera borealis</i>	Migratory – occasional
Common dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis/capensis</i>	Occasional
Killer whale	<i>Orcinus orca</i>	Occasional
Sowerby's beaked whale	<i>Mesoplodon bidens</i>	Occasional/rare
Striped dolphin	<i>Stenella coeruleoalba</i>	Occasional/rare
True's beaked whales	<i>Mesoplodon mirus</i>	Occasional/rare

Many species are known to occur either seasonally or year-round in the waters of the region. However, there is limited information concerning the life history, distribution, and behaviour of many of these species. In coastal areas where the ocean bottom drops off steeply, whales and oceanic dolphins may be seen quite close to land. Fraser's dolphins, beaked whales, pilot whales, and sperm whales are all known to feed in deep water. Humpback whales have specific habitat requirements for breeding and rearing young, favouring warm shallow waters located over sandbanks or close to islands. Although much is now known about the seasonal movement of North Atlantic humpback whales to the Caribbean, the distribution, abundance, and behaviour of other species such as the sperm whale, beaked whales, and the smaller toothed whales have been poorly documented.