

MARINE BIOLOGY

Deal to Legalize Whaling Would Sideline Science

The commercial killing of whales has been banned since 1986 by a body called the International Whaling Commission (IWC). At the time, commercial whaling had driven many whale populations nearly to extinction. But that ban was hobbled by several exceptions. Since then, a trio of whaling nations has killed more and more whales through the controversial loopholes, including research. “There isn’t a real moratorium,” says Monica Medina, the head of the U.S. delegation to IWC. And IWC itself has been riven by internal tensions between those who want to save whales and those who aim to hunt them.

Now, in a bid to tighten the organization’s grip on its members’ whaling and reduce the number of whales killed, IWC Chair Cristián Maquieira of Chile has proposed a controversial deal. In exchange for temporarily narrowing the loopholes, Japan, Norway, and Iceland would be allowed to commercially hunt whales for 10 years.

The draft proposal—and the catch limits that Maquieira unveiled in Washington, D.C., last week—have inflamed conservationists. They fear that legalizing any form of commercial whaling will open the door to other nations and ultimately lead to more, not fewer, whale deaths. “This is a bad deal for whales,” says Patrick Ramage, global whale program manager for the International Fund for Animal Welfare in Yarmouth Port, Massachusetts. And several scientists on IWC’s Scientific Committee charge that the proposed catch limits are not based on science—a stinging rebuke, since IWC’s charter requires it to make its decisions using scientific findings.

The proposal is designed to give IWC more authority over whaling by restricting the loopholes for a decade, in particular the controversial research exemption (*Science*, 27 April 2007, p. 532). It should also significantly reduce the number of whales being killed, says Maquieira. Nearly 1700 whales were harpooned last year, up from 300 in 1990. Using the research exemption, Japan killed about half of those 1700 whales, taking more than 500 Antarctic minke whales alone in the Southern Ocean Sanctuary. The plan would limit Japan’s minke kills to 400 annually for the first 5 years, and then to 200. It would also increase Japan’s fin whale quota in the sanctuary to 10. (Last year, Japan killed one.)

Scientists say some of the proposed quotas were arrived at with little or no input from

the scientific committee. In addition, the plan would permit Japan to commercially harpoon 120 common minke annually in its coastal waters, from a population that many suspect is in trouble. Japan already kills more than 120 minke there as by-catch, a term for accidental capture in fishing gear. “There’s nothing in the proposal to limit the number of whales taken this way,” points out Scott Baker, a conservation geneticist at Oregon State University in Newport and a U.S. delegate to the scientific committee. That means the number of whales caught from this population is likely to go up.

Other experts on IWC’s Scientific Committee are not impressed, either. “The proposal is designed to look scientific,” says Justin Cooke, a mathematical modeler in Freiburg, Germany, who represents the International Union for Conservation of Nature. “But when you look at it carefully, you realize it doesn’t provide any place for the input of scientific advice.”

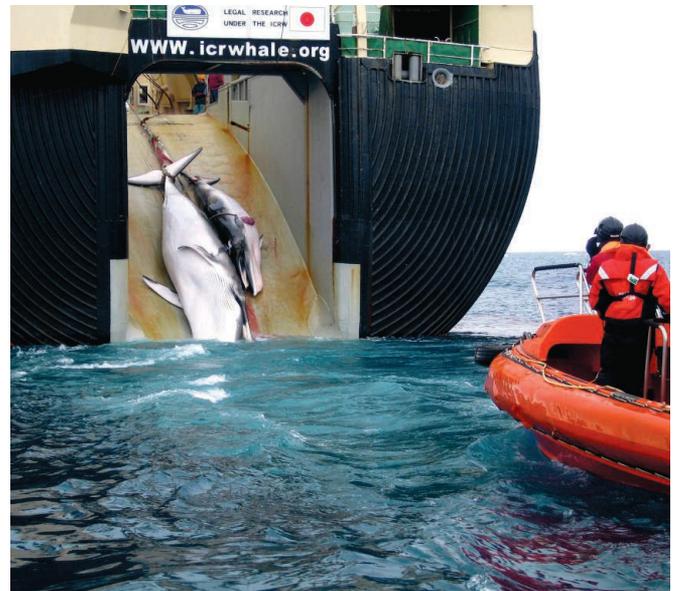
For instance, although the draft mentions the committee’s procedure for determining sustainable catch levels, it’s ambiguous whether those methods will be used, says Cooke. Instead, annual catch limits will apparently be negotiated, then remain fixed for 10 years. It’s uncertain if the quotas would be revised during that period, even if new scientific data warrant a change.

Maquieira counters that several key parts of the agreement, such as compelling whaling vessels to carry tracking devices and independent observers, come from the recommendations of IWC’s Scientific Committee. The tracking data and observers’ reports would show that whalers are abiding by their quotas, he says. The proposal also calls for the whaling nations to carry out market surveys of whale meat and establish a DNA registry to make sure only certain species are hunted. But it’s not clear who would do this. “If it’s the whaling country itself, then

it won’t work,” Baker says. “It won’t be the independent, transparent process it has to be to assure true compliance.”

In another compromise, the proposal would create an enormous sanctuary for whales in the south Atlantic Ocean, running from the equator at Brazil to Tierra del Fuego and to West Africa, but would allow Japan to continue to hunt minke and fin whales in the existing Southern Ocean Sanctuary of Antarctica.

Negotiations on these and other issues are expected to continue right up to IWC’s full meeting in late June in Agadir, Morocco. The proposal must then win the approval of three-quarters of the members, and ratifi-



Slippery slope? Some experts fear a draft plan to eliminate research whaling will lead to more deaths, like those of this minke whale and her calf.

cation is far from certain. Although Japan, Norway, and Iceland have not commented publicly, Australia’s Environment Minister, Peter Garrett, has called the plan unacceptable, and New Zealand has called it inflammatory. The United States is “carefully reviewing” the proposal, Medina says.

Already, conservation organizations are lobbying hard against the draft agreement and its catch limits. “They don’t really reduce whaling but legitimize it,” says Ramage. Even though the agreement would prohibit other member nations from beginning whaling, South Korea, perhaps sensing an opening, has already submitted a request to do just that.

—VIRGINIA MORELL