

South Pacific Whale Sanctuary

Forest and Bird is supporting a further bid by the Government to establish a whale sanctuary in the South Pacific. Mike Donoghue outlines the crisis in Pacific whale populations.

There has been little evidence of any significant increase in the Southern Hemisphere populations of fin, sei or blue whales since 1985, when a halt in commercial whaling took effect. Although some humpback whale populations are recovering (such as those with breeding grounds around southern Africa and Australia), their numbers in the South Pacific remain low.

Between the 1930s and 1950s, when several nations operated large industrial whaling fleets, the Antarctic feeding grounds below Polynesia were internationally recognised as a sanctuary. During this period, the stocks of great whales were grossly depleted elsewhere, particularly in the Atlantic sector. The removal of this protection in the early 1950s meant that the great whales of the South Pacific were the last populations to be heavily exploited by industrial whaling fleets. They have had the least time to recover from the catches authorised by the International Whaling Commission.

In fact, things are even worse for the Polynesian whales.

During the 1950s and 1960s, the Soviet Union's pelagic whaling fleets killed huge numbers of whales, particularly humpbacks, without reporting them to the International Whaling Commission. Information released from KGB files in 1994 showed more than 45,000 Southern Hemisphere humpbacks were illegally taken. Further evidence released at this year's meeting of the IWC's Scientific Committee showed that most of these whales were killed in the South Pacific sector of the Antarctic Ocean. For the six-month seasons of 1959-60 and 1960-61, the USSR fleet killed over 25,000 Polynesian humpbacks but reported only 1,000. These unregulated and unreported kills also explain why there are still so few humpbacks in the South Pacific (probably between one and two thousand whales, outside eastern Australia).

For this reason alone, South Pacific whales deserve a sanctuary to allow their populations to recover. It took two years for New Zealand and Australia to develop a proposal that had the support of Pacific Island states, and was ready to present to the 52nd Annual Meeting of the IWC, held in Adelaide last July. The sanctuary would link the present Southern Ocean

Sanctuary, established by the IWC in 1994 to protect whales on their feeding grounds, to the known breeding grounds in the Pacific region, thus providing protection for the whales throughout their annual migrations of 12,000 kilometres or more. Recent research conducted in the region has shown that humpbacks move from one breeding ground to another, sometimes within the same season. It is therefore necessary to provide protection across the entire area from French Polynesia to Australia, to be certain that the genetic integrity of the few remaining whales is not compromised by any future renewal of whaling activities.

A South Pacific Whale Sanctuary would provide a boost to the development within the region of whale-watching, which can deliver real economic benefits to small island states that rely on tourism. A study conducted in 1999 by Mark Orams, of Massey University, demonstrated that during the winter months when humpback whales can be found, almost half of the tourist income of the small group of Vava'u in northern Tonga was directly attributable to whale-watching. Orams estimates that a single humpback whale, returning each year to Tonga, could generate as much as US\$1 million during its life. While whale-watching is a growing attraction for Tonga, the over-

hunting of whales half a century ago has effectively inhibited the development of whale-watching opportunities for countries such as the Cook Islands, French Polynesia and Samoa.

During the lead-up to the July meeting of the IWC, New Zealand and Australia lobbied heavily to get support for the Sanctuary proposal. Our Minister of Conservation, Hon. Sandra Lee, led the New Zealand delegation, as a signal of the Government's commitment to this initiative. However, Japan and Norway had also been busy with their preparations, and lined up six Caribbean countries (and a new African member, Guinea) to oppose the Sanctuary.

IWC rules require that any major change needs a three-quarters majority for adoption. After a vigorous debate, the sanctuary vote was carried by 18 votes in favour to 11 against. Although this fell well short of the necessary margin, sponsors of the proposal are not despondent. The IWC considered the Southern Ocean Sanctuary proposal three times before it was successfully adopted (eventually by a vote of 24-1). The South Pacific Whale Sanctuary will be back on the agenda for IWC 53 in London next July.

— Mike Donoghue is DoC's scientific advisor to the New Zealand Commissioner to the IWC, Hon. Jim McLay.



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Proposed IWC South Pacific Whale Sanctuary

