



Contact: Scott Smullen
202-482-1097

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Japan Agrees to Suspend Its Hunt of Humpback Whales

After negotiations with the chairman of the International Whaling Commission, Japan has agreed not to target humpback whales during its annual whale hunt that is underway in the seas off Antarctica.

While whaling for scientific research is legally allowed under the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling, Japan's program is controversial in the International Whaling Commission and opposed by the United States for a variety of reasons. The U.S. and Japan, although having opposite views on research whaling, have maintained a long-term dialogue to overcome differences.

"We applaud Japan's decision as an act of goodwill toward the International Whaling Commission," said Commerce Secretary Carlos M. Gutierrez. "Japan has listened intently to the concerns surrounding their hunt and the special significance whales have in many cultures."

The concession follows several rounds of talks between the Japanese IWC vice-chairman and chairman Bill Hogarth, who is also the head of NOAA's Fisheries Service. Hogarth has maintained a dialogue with his Japanese counterparts since the IWC meeting in June. The Japanese whaling fleet set sail on November 18.

Japanese officials told Hogarth they would postpone the harvest of humpback whales at least until after the next annual meeting of the IWC, slated for June. This year, Japan was planning to target 50 humpback whales for the first time in its Antarctic research program along with 50 fin whales and up to 935 minke whales.

"This move can be seen as a bold step forward in breaking the impasse over whaling that has burdened the IWC for many years," said Hogarth. "Japan has shown that it is serious about working to preserve the IWC."

"I commend Bill for his determined leadership on this issue and his years of service on the International Whaling Commission. His efforts, along with those of the Japanese vice-chairman, will reduce tensions among commission members and shape how negotiations within the IWC are conducted in the future," said Gutierrez.

In 1986, the IWC placed a moratorium on commercial hunting to allow species of whales to recover from decades of over harvest. Whales experience a wide range of threats including the unintended interaction with fisheries, ship strikes, pollution, plastic debris, and habitat loss.

NOAA, an earth sciences arm of the Commerce Department, is the research and whale management agency within the United States government, and as such is the lead federal agency at International Whaling Commission meetings. NOAA is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events, and providing environmental stewardship of America's coastal and marine resources.

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