

**Statement from Susan Millward, Animal Welfare Institute
61st Meeting of International Whaling Commission
Funchal, Madeira, Portugal – June 24, 2009**

1. Whales in a Rapidly Changing World

I am the first of three speakers to address you today and my presentation represents many in the environmental, conservation and animal welfare community.

We believe that many people from many cultures and countries share the concerns on which we shall speak. I will address the threats that whales face in the modern world and then comment briefly on welfare aspects and the role of civil society.

I grew up in a coastal town in southern England. Occasionally our sandy shores were tainted by oil spilled from passing tankers and the realization that small drops of oils, for example ingested by preening seabirds, could kill them, made an indelible memory.

I now understand that there are chemicals which are far more toxic than oil¹ and that the effects of our thoughtless addiction to oily fossil fuels stretch far beyond leaks and spills to fundamentally changing our global climate.

So it is that we find ourselves in a rapidly changing world. Essentially we have broken the homeostatic mechanism that has maintained planet Earth within the range of temperatures and conditions that have, until now, allowed our species and all others to evolve and co-exist. Our planet is now sailing into uncharted waters because '*when you change the climate you change everything*' and there are immediate and longer term consequences for all species, including our own.

¹ Some organic pollutants have toxicities that are measured in microscopic quantities of parts per million or even less

There isn't time to detail all the statistics illustrating climate change² but for the cetaceans, climate change is primarily expected to impact them via loss of habitat (given the distinct thermal ranges of most species) and changes in prey³. However, changes in human behavior or activities resulting from, for example, increased flooding and other environmental shifts, may also impact cetaceans. For example, reduced ice cover in the Arctic is projected to lead to increased shipping, oil and gas exploration, and fishing, which will result in additional noise and chemical pollution and also bycatch.

In addition to climate change, an acoustic fog has descended in the seas. At one time many of the great whales probably communicated across the better part of entire ocean basins. Now our noise, mainly from shipping, has reduced their ability to do this and contracted the range of their senses from hundreds (maybe sometimes thousands) of kilometers down to just a few tens. Some of our more powerful noises also cause distress, confusion, displacement and, sometimes even strandings and death.

Because they are at the apex of marine food chains the tissues of these animals tend to host a concentrated and noxious cocktail of xenobiotics⁴; affecting the health of the animals⁵ (and also potentially those humans who eat them⁶). This is not news. Such risks have been known for some decades. What is news is that whilst the levels of some infamous compounds are generally declining in the environment, newer generations of

² WWF provides a helpful overview here: http://www.panda.org/about_our_earth/aboutcc/problems/ noting that the 11 warmest years globally since 1856 have all occurred in the last 15 years and we have recently had significant hurricanes in the Caribbean and the United States, extensive droughts in eastern Africa, Australia, southern Europe and parts of China and India; and uncontrollable floods in many parts of the world, sometimes preceded by a long drought.

³ Recent reviews considering climate change and cetaceans: Alter S.E., Simmonds, M.P. and Brandon J.R.. 2009. The tertiary threat: Human-mediated impacts of climate change on cetaceans. SC61/E8 Paper submitted to the Scientific Committee of the IWC. 17 pages; Learmonth JA, MacLeod CD, Santos MB, Pierce GJ, Crick HQP, Robinson RA. 2006. Potential effects of climate change on marine mammals. *Oceanogr Mar Biol* 44:431-464; Simmonds M.P., & Isaac S.J. 2007. The impacts of climate change on marine mammals: early signs of significant problems. *Oryx* 41:19-26; Simmonds MP, Elliot WJ. 2009. Climate change and cetaceans: concerns and recent developments. *Journal of the Marine Biological Association of the United Kingdom*. 89(1): 203-210

⁴ Xenobiotics refers to chemicals not previously known in nature.

⁵ There is a vast literature concerning contaminant levels in cetaceans. A recent example has looked at levels and trends in dolphins taken and stranded in Japan: Tomohiko Isobe et al. (2008) Organohalogen contaminants in striped dolphins (*Stenella coeruleoalba*) from Japan: Present contamination status, body distribution and temporal trends (1978–2003) *Marine Pollution Bulletin* 58: 396-401

⁶ See for example the review provided by Altherr, S. and Lubner, S. 2009. Toxic Menu – Contamination of Whale Meat and Impact on Consumers' Health. Published by ProWildlife and OceanCare. 32 pages. An earlier assessment of concerns can be found in Simmonds, M.P., Johnston, P.A., French, M.C., Reeve, R. and Hutchinson, J.D. 1994. Organochlorines and mercury in pilot whale blubber consumed by Faroe Islanders. *Sci Total Environ* 149: 97-111.

chemicals are taking their place, including in the flesh of whales. The consequences that such chemicals may have include reproductive and immune disorders and also neurophysiological problems⁷.

Then there are the issues created by our increasing physical presence in the oceans and seas. We have built out into the habitats of these animals and as our boats get bigger and faster and our fisheries more intensive, so our impacts increase.

Clearly we need to better understand and address this synergistic cacophony of threats⁸. In this context we can celebrate the range of work now enshrined in the Scientific Committee on such matters, including the recent climate change workshop. From a conservation perspective, however, Governments and other agencies must act urgently and reduce pressures on cetacean populations wherever practicable.

Even if we did not have these complicating factors, the awkwardness of studying and even identifying whales at sea should be apparent to all delegates here, and especially any of you who have taken a whale watching trip and not been quite sure what species it is you are looking at.

And this further underpins the inherently unsuitability of attempting to sustainably utilize marine animals that are difficult to study, long lived and slow breeding and where there is no real need.

2. Whales and Welfare*

Many regard whales as special animals. Many of these animals live in societies; many show evidence of high intelligence and self awareness. Whilst it is difficult to subject a

⁷ And I might add that changing oceanic conditions and acute noise pollution may alter distributions bringing further difficulties to assessments of whale populations.

⁸ Perhaps the plight of the western gray whale provides our most poignant example of where a small population comes into conflict with our industrial ambitions.

baleen whale to an IQ test, it would be inappropriate to write them off as simple animals. Where appropriate research does exist⁹, there is evidence of sophisticated behaviours.

Whales are of course mammals and clearly capable of suffering in ways that we can understand¹⁰. Governments and intergovernmental bodies around the world are increasingly recognising our responsibility to protect the welfare of the animals that we use, making it a wholly retrograde step to approve the use of explosive missiles on conscious animals.

Despite considerable efforts by some parties, hundreds of animals will endure long and painful deaths each year. Indeed, since commercial whaling cannot be conducted humanely, should it be conducted at all?

3. Civil Society at the IWC

Finally, whilst we are grateful for this opportunity to address the Commission, what civil society requests is the ability to take part properly in the dialogue within this body. NGOs are able to contribute to the substantive discussions in many other Multilateral Environmental Treaties, including for example - in the experience of many of the NGO representatives here today - CITES and the Convention for Migratory species. In the meetings of these bodies our inputs as scientists, lawyers and other professionals are facilitated and even welcomed.

We believe that it would be practical and, indeed, beneficial to the Commission itself to offer us the same opportunities here. Therefore, we call for increased participation and transparency in the work of the Commission.

⁹ most notably for the dwarf minke whales of the Australian Great Barrier Reef – for a review of cetacean intelligence see: Simmonds, M.P. 2006 Into the brains of whales. *Applied Animal Behaviour Status*. 100: 103-116

¹⁰ Brakes, P., Butterworth, A., Simmonds, M.P. & Lymbery, P. (Editors) 2004. *Troubled Waters – a review of the welfare implications of modern whaling activities*. Available at: <http://www.whalewatch.org/reports.asp>

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* Some NGOs do not work on animal welfare issues, and as such have no position on the welfare or cruelty aspects of whaling.