



PhotoCredit: Steininger, Sean.

ECHOES OF THE DEEP: SAVING WHALES FROM THE WHALING INDUSTRY

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Whaling is the practice of hunting and killing whales for various purposes, including their meat, oil, and other products. This activity has been carried out by different cultures for centuries, but it gained significant attention and controversy in recent times. One of the main reasons why whaling is considered unethical is the impact it has on whale populations. Many species of whales are already endangered or threatened due to factors such as fishing gear entanglement, habitat destruction and pollution. An additional reason is that the methods used in whaling are inhumane and cause unnecessary suffering to these intelligent and majestic creatures. Traditional whaling practices involved harpooning whales and then slowly killing them, a process that can take hours or even days. Even with modern hunting techniques, whales may still suffer greatly before dying.

In recent years, there has been a global movement to ban commercial whaling and promote conservation efforts. However, some countries, such as Japan and Norway, continue to engage in whaling under the guise of scientific research or cultural tradition.

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) made a firm ruling on March 31, 2014, declaring that Japan's whaling program was not, in fact, conducted for scientific purposes. In light of this decision, the Court issued a clear directive to Japan, demanding the immediate revocation of any existing authorisations and permits. In a rather disheartening turn of events, Japan revealed its decision to resume hunting whales and their intention to capture 333 minke whales annually from 2015 to 2027.



PhotoCredit: Sutton-Hibbert J./Pregnant whales killed for "scientific research"

Iceland initially planned to halt whale hunting in 2024. However, in June of the same year, the country issued permits allowing whaling to continue until 2029—despite widespread opposition from the Icelandic public. Meanwhile, Japan, like Norway, insists on its right to continue whaling, citing its cultural heritage as justification. This decision has sparked strong reactions from environmentalists and animal rights activists who tirelessly advocate for the protection of these majestic creatures.

One of the most prominent anti-whaling activists, Paul Watson—founder of Sea Shepherd and a lifelong advocate for animal rights and environmental protection—was detained in July 2024 due to an Interpol red notice issued by Japan. After spending five months in prison, Denmark ultimately refused Japan's extradition request over a conflict with whalers.

Anti-whaling nations such as the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Australia argue that whaling poses a significant threat to whale populations and marine ecosystems, deeming the practice both unethical and unsustainable. While Japan's decision may appear to be a compromise, it raises serious concerns about the long-term viability of whale populations and the broader impact on ocean ecosystems.

Whales hold immense ecological significance and remain a focal point for conservationists and environmentalists. Some baleen whale populations have declined by 90%, rendering them ecologically extinct and unable to fulfil their crucial roles in marine ecosystems. Cetaceans play a crucial role in regulating atmospheric CO₂ and are often described as "ocean engineers" due to their impact on carbon cycling. Through the "whale pump," they facilitate the vertical movement of nutrients and carbon in the ocean, while their long migrations between feeding and breeding grounds—known as the "great whale conveyor belt"—help distribute carbon across vast marine ecosystems.

Scientists estimate that if whale populations were restored to their numbers before commercial whaling, they could help capture approximately 1.7 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide annually by storing it in deep-sea environments through whale falls.

Without a doubt, whales are essential for maintaining the health, balance, and biodiversity of our oceans. Their survival is not only a matter of conservation but also a crucial factor in the fight against climate change. Therefore, any decisions made regarding their well-being should prioritise their conservation and welfare above the interests of whaling industries. It is essential to recognise that the protection of these majestic creatures goes beyond national borders and requires global collaboration to achieve meaningful results.

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