

Guest Editorial

Whaling: the home stretch? Sidney Holt

I recently likened the doings in the annual meetings of the International Whaling Commission (IWC) to the games of chess and draughts*. After the 36th meeting, held last June in Buenos Aires, I am tempted to continue mixing sporting metaphors. All commercial catch quotas bar two were reduced, some substantially so. Of special importance was the reduction in the quotas for minke whales in the southern hemisphere by nearly 40 per cent—from 6655 in 1983/84 to 4224 in 1984/85. Since these stocks have been providing about half the world production of whale meat, and considerable foreign currency earnings to the Soviet Union, which exports all its catch to Japan, the cut will cause some problems for the industry. This reduction was made because the scientists advised the IWC that there are far fewer minke whales feeding in the Antarctic than they had thought until last year, and that the minke and other species could probably sustain a yield of no more than 2 per cent per year.

One quota not reduced was Norway's catch of minke whales in the north-east Atlantic. This was already reduced last year to 635 (for 1984) from a previous 1700. This year's scientific evidence was that a safe catch might be around 525, and even as low as 300. The conservationist nations kicked a goal into their own net—by letting votes on these two numbers be taken in the wrong order, so that both were lost. The reverse order would have given a virtually certain 525; instead we had to accept a consensus for the 1985 catch to be the same as in 1984.

Some other quotas could have been much lower, especially those for the catches of fin, sei and minke whales by Iceland. Both the scientific evidence and the votes were there to slash them. In return for not having these votes pressed Iceland abstained on the two minke votes mentioned above. South Korea did the same, for a much lower price. Iceland's price was 91 minke, 18 fin and about 30 sei whales. That saved 2231 minkes in the southern hemisphere; the two abstentions were wasted in the Norwegian minke

vote. To continue the debate in previous issues of *Oryx* (April 1983 and 1984), we must ask ourselves when we should be guided by our principles that such 'horse-trading' is abhorrent and when we can accept with good conscience that it is OK in practice? One partial response to this dilemma is that there is a difference between trading numbers here and now (which can be assessed in terms of losses on swings and gains on roundabouts, provided the existence of no stock is thereby deliberately endangered) and conceding something now in expectation of bigger gains in future. But in reality these tactics are linked. The events recounted were in fact part of the continued crumbling of the solid voting bloc of whaling countries created by the efforts of Japan in 1979, from which Spain defected in 1982 when the commercial moratorium was successfully voted, to start in 1985/86 and 1986. Once Iceland and Korea had decided not to exercise their rights of objection to that decision the way was open for them to look after their short-term whaling interests rather than to their long-term client relationship with Japan.

In this situation the British delegation managed to pull off a hat trick. On the critical votes it isolated itself simultaneously from all the other Commonwealth countries, from other EEC countries except Denmark (perfidious as Albion itself), and from the US. It simply could not bring itself to vote for relatively low numbers.

After this all commercial quotas are set to zero, but are not yet applicable to the three objectors—Norway, Japan and USSR. Each year the scientific evidence favouring a moratorium is being strengthened; it is increasingly clear that there is little if any basis in current science for setting any catch quotas which are safely sustainable. External pressures are on the three to withdraw their objections before the 1985 meeting, and there are forces favourable to this within at least two of them. Yet some conservationists fear that too much pressure could still upset the IWC applecart. Are we really on the last straight, or might someone move the finishing line? Watch this space.

*'Whalemate'. *BBC Wildlife Magazine*, July 1984