



**HUMANE SOCIETY
INTERNATIONAL**

Opening Statement to the 64th Meeting of the International Whaling Commission July 2012

As a whale and dolphin watcher's paradise, Panama is the ideal host for the 64th annual meeting of the International Whaling Commission. In the warm Pacific waters just a handful of miles off its western coast, humpback whales breach and frolic in an area that has long been a primary breeding ground for thirty different species of cetaceans. On the Caribbean side, on the border with Costa Rica, dolphins live year-round in the shallow, biodiverse waters in the archipelago of Bocas del Toro. Together, these whale and dolphin species are part of the magic that draws people of all nations to the Puente del Mundo, "the bridge of the world," and they make Panama a welcome and inspiring venue for the IWC's deliberations.

IWC 64 in Panama City follows closely upon the launch at Rio+20 of GEO-5, the Global Environmental Report of the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP). Remarkably, GEO-5 explicitly recognizes and celebrates the IWC as one of a handful of international organizations that have, over time, developed a higher purpose in accordance with changing attitudes. "The International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling (ICRW), which originally aimed to prevent the oversupply of whale products but turned into a key instrument of whale conservation," GEO-5 notes, "can stand as another example. The governance regime for whales has contributed to more sustainable practices and a change in mindsets, allowing a transition from predominantly consumptive exploitation of a natural resource (whaling) to non-consumptive use such as whale watching and related tourism."

Undeniably, a certain difficulty in achieving harmony in the universe of nations within the IWC persists. Some 35,000 whales have been taken by whalers in the years since 1986, when the IWC adopted the commercial whaling moratorium, and there are IWC member nations that continue to promote commercial whaling and international trade in the face of the many significant threats to the well-being and survival of cetaceans.

Even so, this is but a small percentage of the number of whales taken in prior decades, and the number of nations involved in commercial whaling and related international trade has decreased significantly. Just as importantly, the world has changed so much in three decades, and as GEO-5 makes plain, the world expects so much more from the IWC. "The open oceans are a major global commons and require effective international cooperation and governance," GEO-5's authors relate, and comprising 71 percent of the earth's surface, "the potential collapse of oceanic ecosystems requires an integrated and ecosystem-based approach to ocean governance."

It is against this daunting backdrop, rather than the comparatively minor if sincere differences that divide some nations from others within this body, that the IWC must plan, claim, and secure its future. It is a future in which the IWC plays a primary role in the health and protection of our oceans, a future in which the body exerts greater leadership in respect to the raft of threats that jeopardize all marine life, whether it be oil spills, radioactive contamination, entanglement in fishing gear and marine debris, ship strikes, chemical and noise pollution, emerging diseases, climate change or all of these cumulatively and synergistically.

In a real sense, the IWC embraced its future thirty years ago, in 1986, when it adopted the moratorium on commercial whaling, which history has judged as a bold and necessary, if difficult advance. Now, history waits for the IWC to act decisively for whale conservation and the preservation and health of ocean habits, by transcending the question of whaling and extending its role in relation to the myriad troubles that beset the world's whales and their habitats.

Last year's meeting in Jersey followed just a few months after the great tragedy that befell Japan in the form of the Tohoku earthquake, tsunami, and radiation release, a terrible blow to a proud and accomplished people. The year before that, in 2010, the IWC convened as the United States was engaged in a full-scale effort to contain the Deepwater Horizon spill, a tragic ocean-based catastrophe in the Gulf of Mexico, with terrible consequences for fisheries, livelihoods, tourism, and the habitat of hundreds of marine-based species, including whales and dolphins.

If there is a harbinger event that hangs over IWC 64, it is the massive die-off of nearly 900 dolphins along a long coastline of northern Peru just a few months ago. There, an unexplained mortality event of shocking scope has brought the fragility of life for marine mammals in the 21st century into stark relief, and in a certain way, set the stage for this year's deliberations. It does so above all by reminding us that the future of the IWC, the future that has been the subject of so much discussion in recent years, beckons us with utmost urgency.