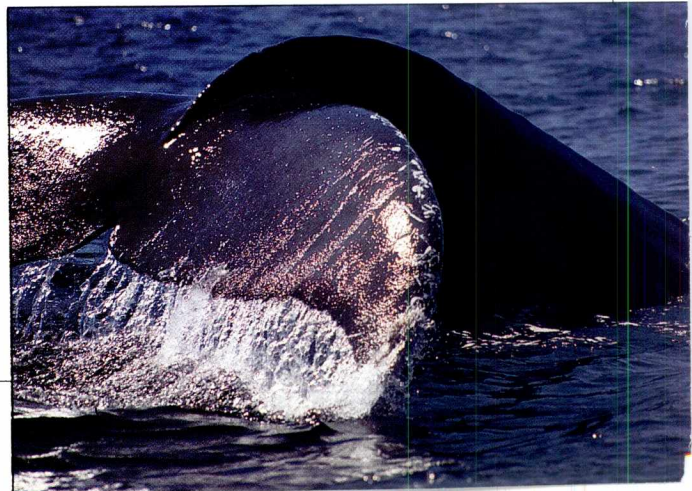


Whale sanctuary in the south Antarctic Sea

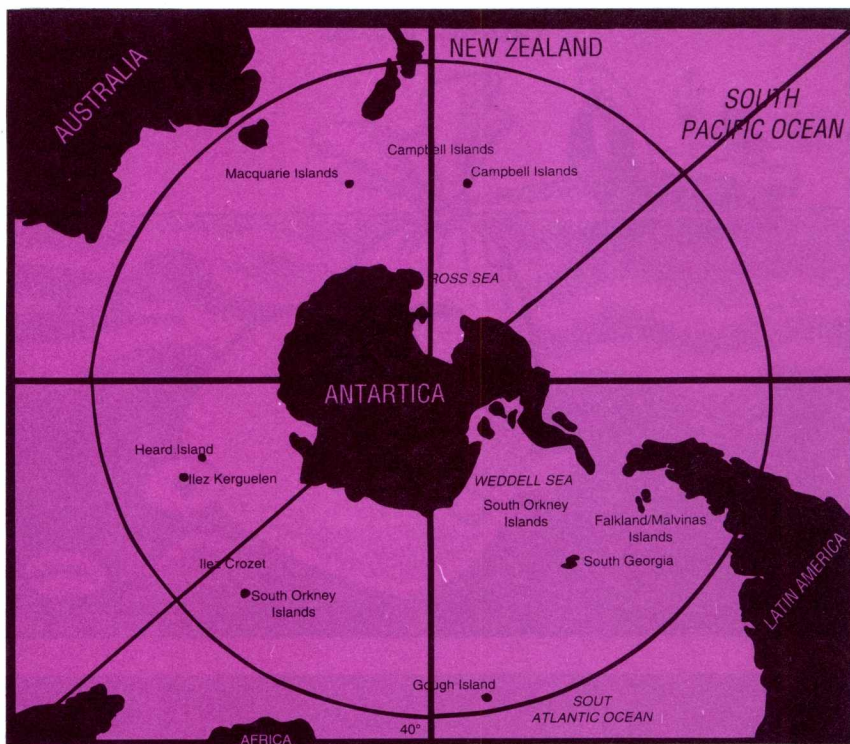


If a communiqué traveling the ocean depths could tell whales about the conclusions reached by the International Whaling Commission (IWC), they would surely celebrate the news.

At its 46th meeting, held in Puerto Vallarta from May 23 to 27, the IWC decided to continue the whaling moratorium voted in 1982 and put into effect in 1986, as well as to establish a secure zone in the south Antarctic Sea for the protection of these mammals.

The unbridled hunt for the planet's biggest creature, which in the fifty years following 1929¹ caused the virtual extinction of some species, led to the establishment of this sanctuary, with the participation of representatives from 31 countries, as well as more than 20 conservation groups.² With 23 votes in favor, one opposed and six abstentions,³ it was decided to establish the sanctuary.

Japan was alone in its opposition to the sanctuary, and not even its allies—such as Norway, Grenada, the Dominican Republic, Saint Vincent and the Solomon Islands—supported its proposal that there be open season on the Minke whale. Japan argues that this kind of whale is abundant in Pacific waters and that if it is not hunted it will feed on other



Map of whale sanctuary, from the 40th parallel south latitude to the edge of Antarctic ice.

species, thereby affecting the marine food chain.

World opinion has noted that Japan, followed by Norway, is a key predator when it comes to whales—for which it pays exorbitant prices—as well as dolphins and other marine species used in the enormous Japanese meat, oil and skin-cream industries.

A world apart

The evolution of whales and dolphins began during the middle Eocene, 50 million years ago. During this period they lost the hind legs and mobile neck of their land-dwelling forebears, acquiring powerful side and tail fins. The bearded cetaceans are the giants of our planet.

The blue whale is probably the largest creature ever to have existed, topping even elephants and dinosaurs. In 1926, south of the Shetland Islands in the Atlantic Ocean, a female was captured which

weighed 200 tons and measured more than 100 feet in length.⁴

Marine biologists have helped reveal the mysteries of this fascinating world, including the incredible ways in which whales communicate, form couples, reproduce and survive.

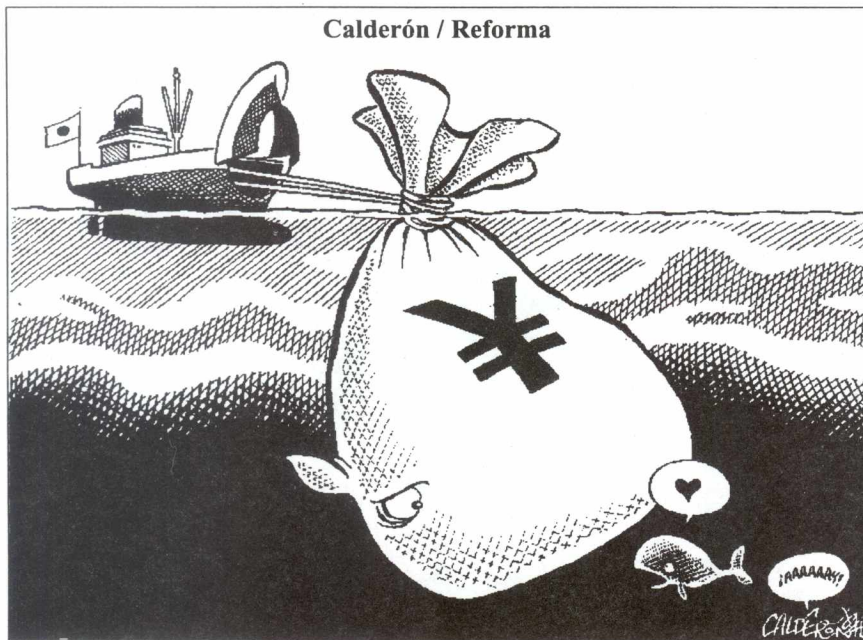
Their findings show an enormous variety in the ways of life of different species. Among the examples is the grey whale, which travels in communities during its migrations, following the rule “women and children first” and males at the end, in order to protect the group. In contrast, the blue whale, when migrating, travels huge distances alone—a fact which favors those who hunt this species. Despite the ill repute given it by Herman Melville’s novel *Moby Dick*, it

¹ Between 1929 and 1979 more than 2 million whales were caught; 20,000 per year (*Reforma*, June 5, 1994).

² Among them the World Wildlife Fund, Mexican Free Trade Action Network, Pronatura, International Conservation, Naturalia, Greenpeace and the Group of 100.

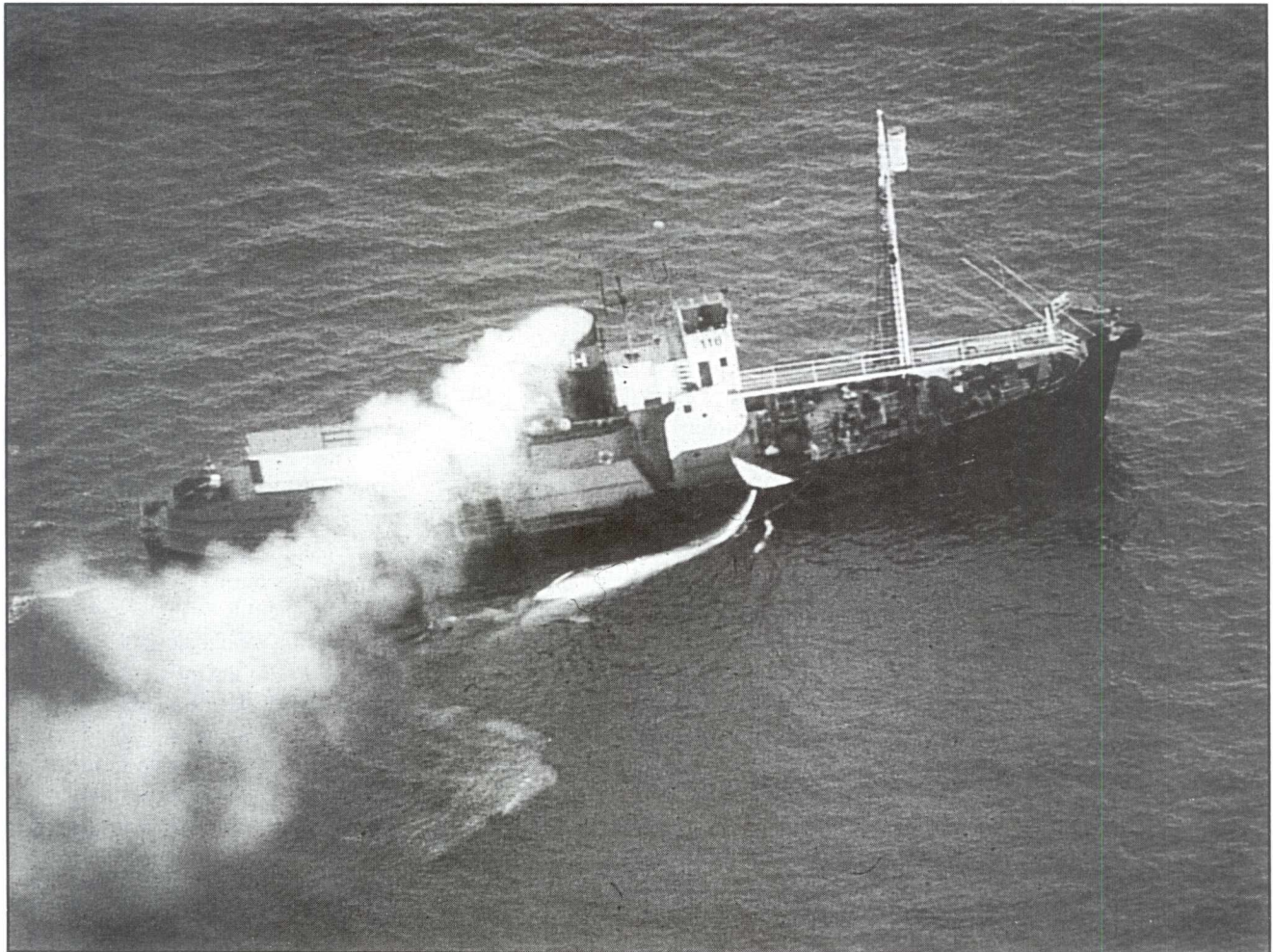
³ Those in favor were Antigua, Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Chile, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, India, Ireland, Mexico, Monaco, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Russia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States. Japan voted no and Norway withdrew, while the People’s Republic of China, Dominican Republic, Grenada, Saint Vincent, the Solomon Islands and South Korea abstained.

⁴ Michael Bright, *Ballenas, delfines, tiburones—los reyes del océano* (Whales, Dolphins, Sharks—Kings of the Ocean). Barcelona, Ediciones Folio, 1992, pp. 11, 21.

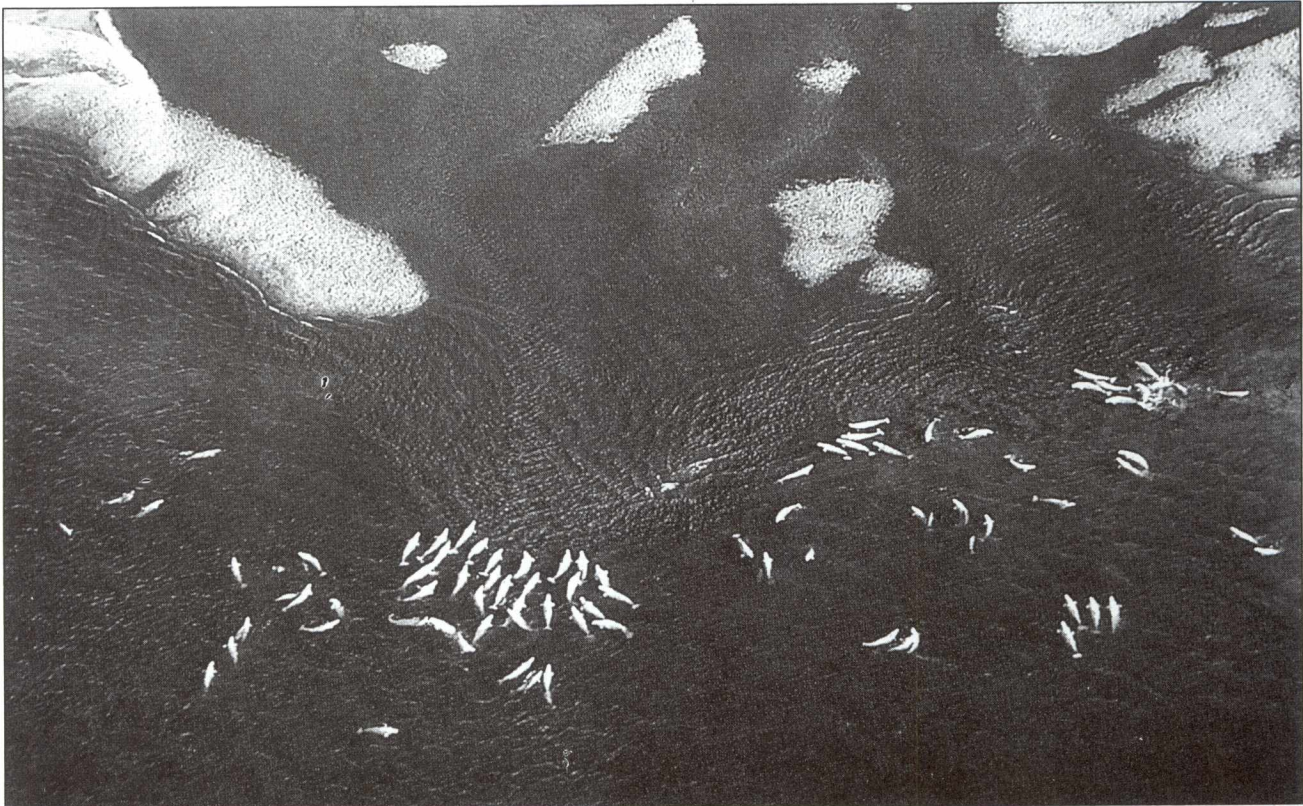


turns out that the orca is a playful, sociable animal which humans have succeeded in taming, teaching it tricks for exhibition at amusement parks. The humpback whale has a singular method for obtaining food by means of its "bubble net," a way of trapping fish in the turbulence caused by blowing air into the water.

Many whale species make sounds which experts interpret as individual messages having to do with sexual activities, location and identity. The blue whale, for example, makes deep, sad sounds, the tones of which gradually rise, forming highly complex series which have been described as "the most powerful expression of feeling known among whales or any other living being."



Boat dragging its catch.



Whales in the Canadian Arctic.

The dwarf whale produces bursts of low-frequency sounds peculiarly known as “deaf train noises,” while the grey whale makes a series of clicks to communicate with its offspring, with which it carries on long “conversations.”

Scientists have grouped the orcas living in the Pacific near Vancouver, Canada, into several clans, on the basis of their vocalizations. Each repertoire is common to members of a given clan, indicating as well that each clan descends from a different long-standing group, which disintegrated upon reaching higher numbers.⁵

The first whalers

Throughout human history, on all the world's coasts, man has found ways to hunt whales. In Norway 4,000-year-old stones with drawings of whales have been found, while in Alaska whale-bone receptacles have been

discovered that date from 3,500 years ago. For modern man, the obstacles presented by whales' gigantic size have been overcome thanks to the use of sophisticated machinery.

Whales are presently engaged in a struggle with man that is much more unequal than the battles they had to engage in against the first whalers. The first whale hunters were few in number and their technique was but little developed. They could only catch species which came near the coasts, traveling in small seal-skin kayaks or cedarwood canoes measuring no more than 30 feet in length, and using wooden harpoons outfitted with conch blades or tips coated with poisons made from plants.

The steam-powered boats and mechanical harpoons of the 19th century were the first signs of the danger threatening whales' existence. Modern times produced cruel techniques such as the “exploding harpoons” which were used to catch

more than two million whales from 1929 to 1979.

When an exploding harpoon enters a whale's body, its teeth open and a small vial of sulfuric acid breaks, igniting the charge. The result is an explosion which—unless it occurs directly in the brain—does not cause the whale to die immediately. Instead the animal feels intense pain, as it seeks to swim as deep as possible. In this situation neither the means nor the ends are justified.

In 1947 a law was promulgated for protection of the grey whale, as a result of which the population of this species recovered substantially. Another law, approved in 1972, prohibited the capture and importation to the United States of marine mammals as well as any food made from them.

In 1987 the International Whaling Commission promulgated the fifth Regulatory Charter for Whale Trading. Unfortunately this charter

⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 23, 35.



Mercedes Quintanilla R.

Save the whales!

was never completely effective, since a large number of special permits were authorized for supposedly “scientific purposes”; this allowed for the continued sale, under scientific guise, of the flesh of such species as sperm whales and finbacks.

Protection at hand

The agreement reached in Puerto Vallarta by the IWC’s member countries, together with ecological groups, laid the bases for creating the whale sanctuary along coasts where several species travel during their migratory life. Rather than surveillance by the Coast Guard or special patrols, the sanctuary was established by means of restrictions and concessions specific to each country.

Thus certain indigenous populations were authorized to carry out limited whaling. The Eskimos of

Alaska were assigned a quota of 204 whales or less over the next four years. The indigenous groups of western Greenland may catch 19 finbacks and 165 Minke whales, while those in the east are assigned 12 Minke whales per year over the next three years. Two whales per year are allotted to the inhabitants of Saint Vincent and Grenada.

For scientific purposes Japan was assigned a quota of 300 Minke whales, a figure which could increase or decrease by 10 percent. Japan also requested an extraordinary quota of 100 whales, but this number was not agreed on. Japan will take the first quota from the Antarctic and seeks to catch the second in the northern Pacific. Norway was allowed a quota of 127 Minke whales in order to conclude a research project begun this year.

Mexico received the IWC’s acknowledgment for its efforts to protect the “sea cow,” which at one point was endangered and now has a sanctuary off the coast of Baja California.

Unfortunately the IWC continues to favor Japan, since the number of whales it was assigned at the 45th convention, held in Tokyo in 1993, remained unchanged at 300 a year.⁶

The fulfillment of the project put forward at the most recent IWC convention depends largely on member countries’ good will and their realization that saving marine animals should be a higher priority than servicing restaurants and cosmetic industries **M**

Mónica Ching
Assistant Editor.

⁶ *Britannica Book of the Year, Events of 1993. Environment: Wildlife Conservation*, p. 169.