



Scientific Whaling by the Republic of Korea

IUCN Position

13 July 2012

This note explains IUCN's position in relation to the recent announcement by the delegation of the Republic of Korea, in its Opening Statement to the 64th meeting of the International Whaling Commission (IWC) held in Panama City, July 2-6ⁱ that a resumption of scientific whaling, targeted at minke whales, is being considered.

IUCN's long-standing position on whaling is that any hunting of whales, if it is to take place at all, should be regulated on the basis of sound science that ensures that the level of catch is sustainable. This applies to all forms of whaling, regardless of whether or not it is commercial, scientific, aboriginal or coastal. Many Members of IUCN consider that direct killing of whales should be avoided altogether, noting that non-lethal uses, such as whale watching, have provided, in recent years, a greater economic yield, and are potentially more sustainable. At the 2008 IUCN World Conservation Congress held in Barcelona, the Members of IUCN adopted two motions on whales: 4.027 (Relationship between fisheries and great whales) which confirms the generally accepted scientific consensus that great whales play no significant role in the current crisis affecting global fisheries; and 4.115 (Non-lethal utilization of whales) which affirms the value of non-lethal uses of whales.

Whales of several species have been hunted in Korean waters since at least the 19th century, but catches of minke whales (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*) increased sharply during the 1960s, reaching over 1,000 per year in the late 1970sⁱⁱ. The minke whales taken off Korea belong to the Sea of Japan (East Sea)/Yellow Sea/East China Sea management stock as defined by the IWC. This population of whales, known to specialists as the "J-stock" minke whale, is unusual in that it breeds in late summer, unlike other known baleen whales, which breed in winterⁱⁱⁱ. It occurs year-round in Korean and Japanese coastal waters, and part of the population migrates into the Okhotsk Sea in early summer. It is presumed also to occur in North Korean and Chinese waters.

Evidence of decline in the minke whale population exploited off Korea led the IWC in 1985 to classify it as a Protected Stock, on the advice of its Scientific Committee^{iv, v}. The Government of Korea prohibited whaling from 1986 at the start of IWC's commercial whaling moratorium. However, with the expansion of coastal set nets, by-catches of minke whales in Korean waters increased from the late 1980s. Reported by-catches have averaged 80-100 animals per year since 1996^{vi}, but the IWC Scientific Committee has concluded, on the basis of genetic sampling of whale products marketed in Korea, that total catches have been up to twice the reported numbers, averaging 150-200 whales per year^{vii}. An unknown proportion of these unreported catches come from illegal whaling. For 2011, Korean authorities reported 21 known cases of illegal catches to the IWC^{viii}. Additional J-stock minke whales are taken as bycatch and scientific catches in Japanese waters. The Scientific Committee has expressed concern about the continued high level of catches from this population^{ix}.

Since 2000, annual cetacean sightings surveys have been conducted by the Korean National Fisheries Research and Development Institute, and the resulting abundance estimates have been endorsed by

the IWC Scientific Committee^x. According to the Committee's population assessments, current abundance estimates are still well below pre-whaling levels, and the population is projected to continue to decline if recent estimated catch levels continue^{xi}. The abundance estimates show a decline of 5-7% per year since 2000: while this trend is not statistically significant, it is consistent with the projected decline^{xii}. The total population size remains uncertain, due to lack of data from North Korean and Chinese waters, where additional bycatches are believed to occur

Given that current catch levels are likely to be unsustainable, IUCN considers that any plans to increase catches at this stage would be ill-advised. The priority should be to achieve more complete reporting and sampling of by-catches, and to develop a mitigation strategy to reduce by-catches and other takes to a sustainable level. With respect to reported interactions between whales and fisheries, the first step is to improve understanding of the precise nature and geographical occurrence of the interactions.

Data gained from additional directed catches would be unlikely to provide significant new information for management. Programs of whaling for scientific purposes undertaken by other IWC members have failed to achieve their stated objectives, even when these have involved large annual takes over many years^{xiii, xiv}. IUCN appreciates the ongoing cetacean research by Korean institutions using non-lethal methods, such as taking biopsies from animals encountered during sightings surveys, which provides valuable information on population structure.

In the run-up to the World Conservation Congress taking place in Jeju in September, IUCN urgently requests the Government of the Republic of Korea to reconsider the plans to resume scientific whaling, and instead to continue to support non-lethal whale research in Korean waters.

Interest in whales is growing in Korea, as evidenced by the whale-watching cruises on offer from Jangsaengpo Port and other locations. Non-lethal use of whales is now the major use of whales worldwide in economic terms, and with appropriate management it can be sustainable. The whaling museum in Ulsan contains historical material on the gray whale (*Eschrichtius robustus*), a species that was hunted off Ulsan until the 1960s. Sadly, the population was severely reduced by commercial whaling, and no gray whales have been seen in Korean waters since 1977. However, a remnant population of gray whales migrating through Asian waters is believed to exist^{xv}, and IUCN has launched a range-wide conservation initiative^{xvi} with the aim of securing the recovery of this population, and its return to Korean waters. IUCN cordially invites and encourages the governments of the Republic of Korea and other current and former range states of the western gray whale to participate in this initiative. The next meeting of the IUCN Western Gray Whale Advisory Panel will take place in Korea in November 2012^{xvii}.

ⁱ [Opening Statement of the Republic of Korea to the 64th Meeting of the International Whaling Commission.](http://www.iwcoffice.org/sc64docs/Opening%20Statements/64-OSc-Korea.pdf) [iwcoffice.org/sc64docs/Opening Statements/64-OSc-Korea.pdf](http://www.iwcoffice.org/sc64docs/Opening%20Statements/64-OSc-Korea.pdf).

ⁱⁱ Park 1987. *History of the whaling of the Korean Peninsula*. Deha Press, Busan [in Korean].

ⁱⁱⁱ Kato H.1992. *Rep. int. Whal. Commn* 42:443-453.

^{iv} IWC. 1984. Report of the Scientific Committee. *Rep.int Whal. Commn* 34:47.

^v IWC. 1986. Chairman's Report of the 37th Annual Meeting. *Rep.int Whal. Commn* 36:16.

^{vi} Annual Progress Reports submitted by the Republic of Korea to the IWC Scientific Committee.

http://www.iwcoffice.org/_documents/sci_com/2011progreports/SC-63-ProgRepKorea.pdf

^{vii} IWC. 2012. Report of the Scientific Committee. *J. Cetacean Res. Manage.* 13 (Suppl.):104.

^{viii} IWC. 2012. Summary of infraction reports received for 2011. www.iwcoffice.org/_documents/commission/IWC64docs/64-Inf4.pdf

^{ix} IWC. 2009. Report of the Scientific Committee. *J. Cetacean Res. Manage.* 11(Suppl.):41.

^x An, Y.R *et al.* 2012. *J. Cetacean Res. Manage.* 13(Suppl.):450-453.

^{xi} IWC. Report of the 2nd Intersessional Workshop for the Implementation Review of North Pacific Minke Whales. *J. Cetacean Res. Manage.* 14(Suppl.):(in press).

^{xii} IWC. 2010. Report of the Working Group on the in-depth assessment of western North Pacific minke whales, with a focus on the J stock. *J. Cetacean Res. Manage.* 11(Suppl. 2): 198-217.

^{xiii} IWC. 2008. Report of the intersessional workshop to review data and results from Special Permit research on minke whales in the Antarctic. *J. Cetacean Res. Manage.* 10 (Suppl.):411-448.

^{xiv} IWC. 2010. Report of the expert workshop to review the ongoing JARPN II Programme. *J. Cetacean Res. Manage.* 11(Suppl. 2):405-450.

^{xv} Weller D.W.and Brownell R.L. A re-evaluation of gray whale records in the western North Pacific. Paper SC/64/BRG10 submitted to IWC Scientific Committee, Panama, May 2012.

^{xvi} www.iucn.org/wgwap/rangewide_initiative

^{xvii} www.iucn.org/wgwap/wgwap