Protecting Whales

A global responsibility

defra
Department for Environment
Food and Rural Affairs

Humpback whales sing the longest and most complex songs in the animal kingdom. These ‘songs’ are a series of whistles, squeals, grunts, groans and wails divided into ‘verses’ which are sung in specific orders and may last half an hour.

Foreword

Gordon Brown
Prime Minister

Protecting whales for future generations requires global action

The UK Government opposes all whaling apart from limited aboriginal subsistence whaling. We strongly support the International Whaling Commission's moratorium on commercial whaling. The moratorium is essential because many whale populations have not recovered from past over-exploitation and now face other serious threats, including pollution and climate change.

Whaling is unacceptably cruel and is economically unnecessary. The UK Government's position is that whale watching is the only interaction with whales that is sustainable. Many coastal communities, including those in developing countries, can profit from tourist income generated by a well-regulated whale watching industry. The current and future benefits from whale watching far exceed those from killing whales.

I urge Governments to join the UK, and other anti-whaling countries, in the International Whaling Commission to maintain the moratorium on commercial whaling so that our generation meets its responsibility to protect whales.

Sir David Attenborough
Naturalist and broadcaster

Whales are beautiful and amazing creatures

Bigger than the largest dinosaur, the blue whale is the largest animal to have lived on Earth. They are intelligent creatures with complex social lives.

There is no humane way to kill a whale at sea and there are alternatives to all products from whales. It is time to stop the unnecessary destruction of whales and start to cherish them, so that they do not remain only as skeletons in museums. Collective action by nations across the globe is needed to protect whales for future generations.

Do whales need protection?

The southern hemisphere blue whale population has fallen from

240,000

in 1900 to

1,700

in 1996

Blue whale with calf.

Yes, some whales are particularly at risk of extinction because their populations remain endangered following past exploitation from commercial whaling.

Recovery of whale populations is slow because whales are some of the slowest-reproducing of all animals. They are at high risk from a number of threats including whaling; ship strikes; being ensnared in fishing nets; strandings; disease and chemical pollution. Scientists, including those working within the International Whaling Commission (IWC), agree that all whale species face severe environmental threats from climate change, the long-term effects of which are unclear.

At the height of commercial whaling many species were hunted from relative abundance to near extinction. The North Atlantic gray whale population – one of only three gray whale populations – is now extinct. Of the thirteen species of great whales, seven are on the World Conservation Union (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species with a very high or high risk of extinction. These include blue, humpback, fin and sperm whales. Unless adequate conservation measures are put in place and enforced five more species are likely to be joining the Red List of Threatened Species.

The population of blue whales in the Southern Hemisphere has been devastated, plunging from about 240,000 in 1900 to less than 2,000 now. The humpback whale population has been cut from an estimated 115,000 to 25,000. There are only about 150 western gray whales left, including only about 30 females capable of breeding.

The collapse of many whale populations to a level close to extinction led to an internationally-agreed moratorium on commercial whaling by the IWC. This moratorium, which took effect in 1986 and is still in force, was a bold environmental step years ahead of its time. Twenty years on, the reasons for the moratorium remain valid; many populations and some entire species are still under threat of extinction.

Yet the whaling continues

Despite the low numbers of many whale populations, whaling continues.

About 30,000 whales have been killed by commercial and 'scientific' whalers since 1986 when the IWC's moratorium on commercial whaling came into effect. Alarmingly, the number of species hunted continues to grow, with Japan and Norway all having recently expanded their whaling programmes. The number of whales killed annually has increased from 556 in 1993 to over 1,853 in 2006.

Norway objected to the moratorium so is not legally bound by it, and resumed commercial whaling in 1993. Norway awards itself an annual quota of North Atlantic minke whales, set at over 1,000 whales for the 2007 season, and is considering killing even more in future.

Japan agreed to the moratorium, but in 1987 began exploiting a loophole in the IWC Convention which permits lethal 'scientific' whaling, selling the majority of the produce. Japan's expanding 'scientific research' programmes kill about 1,000 whales each year, including whales in the IWC's Southern Ocean Sanctuary. Some of these species have been classified by the IUCN as being at a very high risk of extinction.

Iceland resumed 'scientific' whaling in 2003, exploiting the same loophole as Japan, and intends to kill 200 minke whales in 2007. In defiance of the moratorium, Iceland resumed commercial whaling in 2006, planning to kill 39 whales, including nine 'endangered' fin whales in 2006/7. Iceland's action has been strongly condemned internationally, with 25 countries plus the European Commission – together representing over one billion people – issuing a formal protest (démarche).

The UK believes that both 'scientific' and commercial whaling are wrong because they circumvent a vital international conservation measure. We believe that lethal scientific whaling is unnecessary because all of the information required for conservation and stock management can be obtained without killing whales.

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Harpooned minke whale on deck of factory ship.

What are the arguments for protecting whales?

Inquisitive gray whale approaches boat.

'Whale watching is a growing industry, generating income which is estimated at over **1billion US dollars** a year.'

The ecological argument:

Whales are at the top of the ocean's complex food web and so have an important place in marine ecosystems. When a marine predator is removed, this can have dramatic consequences for the rest of the ecosystem, causing negative changes in the presence and numbers of other species, which can lead to a loss in biodiversity. These changes can have economic implications.

The economic argument:

There is no economic need to kill whales because there are alternatives to all products derived from whales. There is, moreover, a sustainable profitable alternative to slaughter. Whale watching is a growing industry, operating in over 90 countries and territories, generating income which is estimated at over 1 billion US dollars a year. It provides employment in coastal communities, both in the whale watching operations themselves and in services to meet tourists' needs for accommodation and food. Local communities can derive huge economic benefits from whales without killing them.

See also the Information Sheet on Whale watching – the benefits

Japan claims that the IWC moratorium on commercial whaling is reducing commercial fish stocks because whales both eat large quantities of fish and compete with fish for food. It claims that whales and other marine mammals worldwide eat more than five times the amount of fish caught by commercial fishermen. The implication is that fewer whales would mean more fish available to fishermen. However, Japan has been using questionable figures and simplistic arguments to convince countries which rely heavily on fishing that whaling is justified for the wider common good.

The UK and other countries think that these arguments are deeply flawed. Many experts in the IWC Scientific Committee and elsewhere have criticised Japanese science in this area for its biased approach and for ignoring the complex way in which species interact in ecosystems. It is far too simplistic to argue that the removal of whales will automatically result in an increase in fish stocks. Those making such claims see predator-prey relations as a simple food chain but the reality is that oceans have complex food webs. For example, not many fish species eaten by whales are targeted by commercial fisheries, and some species eaten by whales may in fact be major predators of other commercially important fish.

Equally, it has been shown that over-exploitation by humans is mainly responsible for the low stocks or collapse of many commercial fisheries. Removal of other top predators will not solve the fundamental problem of over-fishing.

A small, and declining, number of people in the world eat whale meat. In Norway it is confined to two or three coastal areas and in Iceland very few people eat whale. In Japan a recent survey suggested that less than 1% of the population – and hardly any young people – eat whale. Only in a few coastal places is there a history of eating whale and demand is so low that stockpiles of whale meat are growing. This counters arguments that anti-whaling countries are attacking the cultural tastes of the whaling nations.

The moral argument:

Whales are intelligent, social and sensitive. Scientists therefore make the reasonable assumption that they are susceptible to cruelty both individually as victims and, through bereavement, as family groups. Whaling methods are inherently and inescapably cruel, involving an unacceptable level of suffering. Death is caused by a harpoon with an explosive grenade head which penetrates into the whale before detonating. It is fired from a moving ship at a submerged, moving target often in difficult sea conditions with poor visibility. Whales are often not killed instantaneously, so a gunshot or second harpoon follows. The IWC has expressed concern about Japanese hunting methods, with 60% of whales not dying instantaneously and some taking hours to die. Japan is now refusing to provide data to the IWC on time to death of whales killed in its hunts.

If such inhumane methods were used for the slaughter of similarly intelligent land animals there would be international outrage. Japan compares whaling to cattle slaughter but this is not credible. Cattle are not pursued, are stunned before being killed and have an instant death under carefully controlled conditions. This contrasts with the fate suffered by whales: the stress of the chase, the first harpoon strike followed by an often long and potentially painful time before death.

The intrinsic value argument:

We value whales because they are complex, advanced creatures. Blue whales can measure up to 30 metres long and weigh up to 150 tonnes. Fin and bowhead whales can live for over 100 years. The gray whales' migration between their winter breeding grounds off Mexico and feeding area in the Bering Sea is a round distance of about 10,000 kilometres – one of the longest migrations by any mammal.

We also value whales because they are highly intelligent and social animals. Many whales are known to cooperate in finding food and have been seen to defend themselves by forming a circle surrounding calves and wounded animals. Some whales also help injured individuals of the same species, even lifting them to the surface to breathe.

Whales can communicate across vast distances – it is believed that some species can hear each other as much as 800 kilometres apart. Individuals have their own unique signature calls and many people enjoy and are inspired by hearing whale 'songs'. Whilst considerable research effort goes towards estimating the numbers of whales in the oceans, science is only just beginning to understand the enigmatic lives of the largest animals on earth and the impact of our activities upon them.

'The IWC has expressed concern about Japanese hunting methods, with **60%** of whales not dying instantaneously and some taking hours to die.'

Our global responsibility to protect whales

It is our global responsibility to protect whales for future generations. The UK's policy on whaling is not solely based on ecological, economic and moral arguments and values informed by science, but takes account of the precautionary principles of international law. If whaling continues without a rigorous and robust management scheme, many whale species could become extinct within our lifetime. Whales are a common heritage that is truly global, as most travel vast distances across the world's oceans. Whales are the responsibility of all countries, whether or not they have coasts. All countries should therefore recognise their responsibility to protect whales.

What is the International Whaling Commission?

The International Whaling Commission (IWC) is the only organisation for the international management and conservation of whales and is in the best position to co-ordinate global action. The IWC was established to administer the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling, 1946, which aims to:

- 'safeguard for future generations the great natural resources represented by the whale stocks' and
- 'provide for the proper conservation of whale stocks and thus make possible the orderly development of the whaling industry.'

However the UK believes it should evolve to embrace wider issues of the conservation of whales and small cetaceans, and the encouragement of whale watching.

See also the Information Sheet on the IWC

Who are the members of the IWC?

The IWC has over 75 members. They are divided into two highly polarised camps – those supporting whaling, led by the whaling nations of Japan, Norway and Iceland and those opposed to whaling. The anti-whaling nations include countries from every continent. They also support the IWC protecting small cetaceans.

See also the Information Sheets on IWC Members and the IWC and Small Cetaceans

Why do more countries need to join the IWC's anti-whaling group?

The IWC has been vital for ensuring the survival of numerous whale species and creating the opportunity for whale populations to recover.

However, there is a long way to go with all whale species facing a range of severe threats. It is therefore imperative that enough countries join the anti-whaling group on the IWC to maintain the moratorium on commercial whaling and avoid the appalling mistakes of the past, when over-exploitation resulted in the near extinction of many whale species.

For several years the anti-whaling countries have held a simple majority of votes within the IWC. However, the number of ostensibly pro-whaling countries has increased recently mainly through recruitment of developing countries by Japan. If the pro-whaling countries hold the simple majority there will be increasing pressure to weaken the moratorium and re-open trade in whale products.

Unless more conservation-minded countries join the IWC very soon, the pro-whaling countries are likely to hold a majority, enabling them to dominate the IWC agenda, introduce secret ballots, reverse resolutions to protect whales and engineer the deletion from the IWC's agenda of conservation themes including environmental threats, small cetaceans and welfare issues.

The worst case scenario is an IWC with a majority of pro-whaling countries lifting the moratorium. Some whale species were on the brink of extinction before the ban came into place, so the threat to their survival if the moratorium is lifted cannot be over-emphasised. If the international community allows this to happen, whales will disappear forever. Lifting the moratorium would also have serious consequences for the restrictions on trade in whale products currently in force under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) which regulates international trade in species threatened with extinction. Removal of the ban on commercial whaling, even in the Exclusive Economic Zones of whaling countries, would result in pressure within CITES to reduce the existing restrictions on trade.

Any weakening of the CITES restrictions in the face of such pressure could lead to an increased demand for whale products, and a significant increase in the volume of whale products traded internationally. All this could lead to commercial whaling increasing quickly and being virtually uncontrolled – much as it was before the moratorium was introduced.

There is an alternative to the worst case scenario. Whaling is expensive – if you were to start from scratch and prepare a business case it would definitely fail. Younger people have little desire for expensive whale meat, so in time whaling should cease to be a key political objective, and the effort by the pro-whaling countries to gain support in the IWC could fade. All this could happen in a few years, but then so could the worst case scenario. That is why more conservation-minded countries should urgently join the IWC. We need to act now to make the IWC a strong and effective conservation organisation.

Why should you join the IWC?

The IWC is the internationally recognised body for the conservation of whales.
Membership of the IWC is the key way to meet the global responsibility for protecting whales.

A return to widespread commercial whaling is only a few votes away in the IWC. Therefore, the membership of each additional anti-whaling country will make a significant difference to the conservation of whales.

There are strong arguments, drawing on ecological, economic and moral grounds as well as values, for more countries to join those already committed to protecting whales. People living in non-whaling countries are highly likely to value going whale watching or gaining employment from whale watching activities. They would prefer to know that their government is helping to protect whales for future generations, by preventing the whaling nations from continuing to destroy their common global heritage.

CITES recommends that commercial trade should be banned in all species protected from commercial whaling by the IWC. Most whale species are listed in CITES Appendix I, which prevents international trade in whale products. CITES members need to resist the down-listing of any whale species.

Those members of CITES who are serious about their responsibilities should join the IWC because CITES recognises the IWC as the lead organisation on whaling issues. At the 2002 meeting of CITES a resolution was passed recommending 'that those parties that do not currently adhere to the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling be encouraged to do so'.

See also the Information Sheet on CITES and the IWC

How can you join the IWC?

You can find out how to join the IWC by contacting the IWC Secretariat and more information about the Commission is on its website (www.iwcoffice.org). Joining is easy, a Government is required to formally deposit an Instrument of Adherence to the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling with the US Government in Washington, and at the same time, notify the IWC Secretariat of its intention to join. The cost of joining depends on factors including a country's Gross Domestic Product, Gross National Income and the size of the delegation. Membership for countries starts from around €6,500 a year.

The UK Government will be pleased to offer information and advice to countries wanting to join the IWC.

Where to find more information

The International Whaling Commission (Secretariat), The Red House, 135 Station Road, Impington, Cambridge, CB24 9NP, United Kingdom.

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Website: www.defra.gov.uk

The IUCN (World Conservation Union)

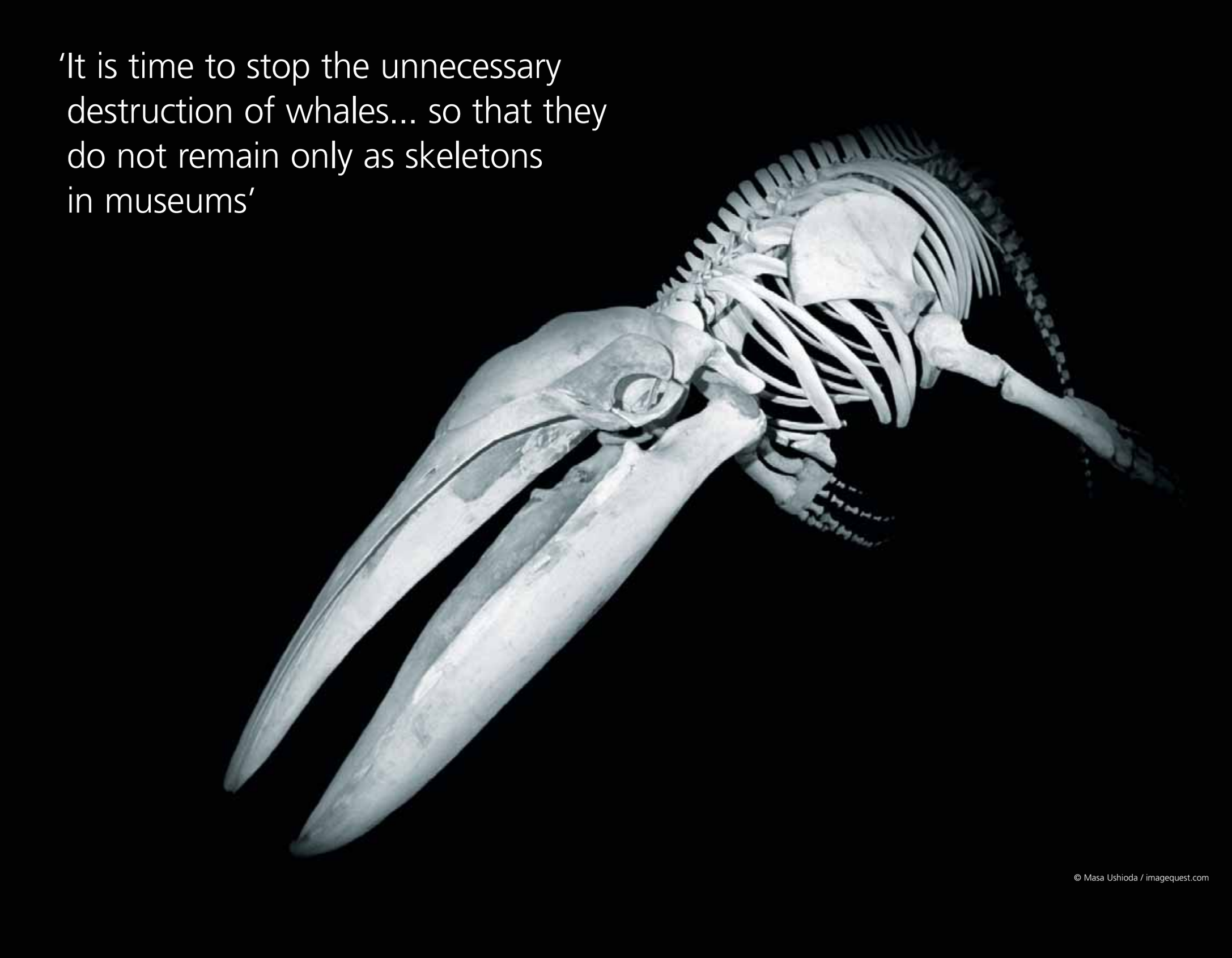
Website: www.iucn.org

Information has been taken from the IUCN 2007 Red List of Threatened Species (www.iucnredlist.org) downloaded on 1 November 2007.

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES)

Website: www.cites.org

‘It is time to stop the unnecessary destruction of whales... so that they do not remain only as skeletons in museums’



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