

Whaling

Sir,

Though the history of the International Whaling Commission (IWC) has been one of too little too late, it has at least stopped the extinction of some species. The moratorium on commercial whaling has been moderately successful. I cannot say totally successful because whaling has continued under the guise of 'scientific whaling' by Japan and Norway, while other countries have given up whaling altogether.

There have been several scientific papers explaining the suffering involved in killing whales, presented at the meetings of the IWC, and a number have even appeared in refereed scientific journals (eg *Animal Welfare* 4 (1995): 125-129; 5 (1996): 57-62). The potential for suffering is immense: there is the chase, the harpooning – which often does not kill because a second harpoon, or rifle shots are required – and the psychological stress, which would occur when such an intelligent and social animal loses companions. Public opinion would not allow harpoons to be used when elephants or deer or any other land mammals are killed.

There is little doubt that the majority of people in the world who have thought about whaling are opposed to it, even in Japan. But when there is money to be made and jobs provided, ethical and animal welfare considerations come second. The recent history of the exploitation of nature has been one of rape. The best technology is used to take as much as possible with the least cost in the shortest time, without regard to the consequences, and all in the name of economics and jobs. There is no shortage of examples – cod, herring, anchovy, blue fin tuna, elephants and now tigers.

Whaling is a good example because spurious arguments are used to justify the exploitation: that whales are eating too much and disturbing the ecological balance, that whaling is a cultural necessity, that there would be poverty and starvation in whaling areas if it stopped, that a country has a right to do what it wants.

In fact, whaling is only profitable to the few people involved. Whale watching, on the other hand brings jobs to more people and pleasure to a great many. Consumptive use is not sustainable – in 1989 a six-year survey by the IWC revealed that some whale species had been depleted by as much as 90-99 per cent. They may never recover.

The world has reached an interesting time in its history. The arguments to exploit every possible resource become more insistent as the growth in human population accelerates. In the wake of human need, ethical and animal welfare considerations are falling away.

Will the human species have gained the whole world and lost its soul? What then will be the consequences?

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