

Who 'owns' the whales in international disputes?

By Susanne Steffens
Oregon Daily Emerald

The controversy over whaling has complicated national relations and has created tensions and recriminations all over the world.

Whales have become a symbol of the environmental movement, and many animal groups consider them highly intelligent mammals that should not be killed, but some nations arguing their tradition of eating whales, together with retaining industry to protect jobs.

Since the International Whaling Commission was established in 1946, the main problem has been to find a balance between the whaling and anti-whaling nations' objectives and to reach correct measures of the whale stock throughout the year.

The resumption of commercial whaling is the most disputable question at present, on account of the new estimation from the Scientific Committee of the International Whaling Commission agreeing that the stock of minke whales is in no danger of depletion or extinction.

Norway has, based on this new information, harvested minke whales from June this year, and soon Iceland and Japan will follow. The new catches have made the whole world cry out in protest, threatening sanctions and boycotts, which has made the Norwegian government very nervous.

If whaling is prohibited as the result of pressure from abroad —

despite scientific evidence that limited whaling would not represent a threat to the species of whale in question — the fear is that similar loss of sovereignty over natural resources, such as fish, energy, forests and minerals, could follow. The whaling issue is a matter of principle for Norway, uniting the country behind the call for national sovereignty in resource management.

It is clear that minke whales are sufficiently abundant today that they may be depleting the food resources needed by clearly endangered whales — such as the blue and bowhead whales. While minke have flourished in recent years, endangered whale stocks have not shown significant signs of revitalization. Managing competing stocks such as the minke will contribute to maintaining a balance and help clearly endangered whales to replenish their stocks.

At the 1992 meeting of the IWC, the Scientific Committee unanimously concluded that the north Atlantic minke whale is in no danger of depletion or extinction, with about 86,700 minke whales in the northeast Atlantic alone.

The new evidence has brought the anti-whalers together, willing to fight against any catches from the whaling nations. Most countries are at present waiting for the United States to voice a stronger opposition to the killing of whales, but no economic sanctions against Norway have yet been

accepted by the president.

The decision is not at all easy, because whaling concerns the private resources of a nation. Most Americans, however, stand together behind the "Save the Whales" movement that includes many diverse elements.

Taken separately, none of these elements would have had the momentum to carry the entire conservation community toward a common goal, but together they had a carrying power that could not have been anticipated. Together, they

would bring about the greatest single victory in the history of the environmental community, the elimination of commercial whaling.

One of the reasons that the whale has been elevated to near divine status is because of the media and recreational parks like Sea World. Feature films like *Flipper* led to a long-running television series of the same name, where the protagonist performed feats of intelligence.

Everybody fell in love with whales and dolphins, primarily

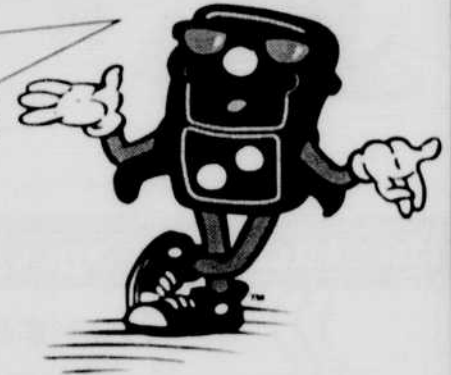
because of the way that they were being depicted on television and in the movies; they were sensitive, intelligent creatures, whose only desire, it appeared, was to make our lives green and more enjoyable.

Greenpeace was catapulted into the forefront of the whale-conservation movement, with the image of brave men in tiny rubber boats trying to stop the whalers from getting their catches. Photographs were reproduced in magazines and news-

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