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## Costa Rica And Nicaragua Could Turn The Tide For The World's Whales

by Mike Leffert

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If whales are still endangered species, Costa Rica and Nicaragua could be crucial in saving them from extinction. Both countries are undergoing internal battles to preserve their votes against lifting a ban in force since 1986 on hunting the animals. Pro-whaling states, Japan, Norway, and Iceland among them, have been gaining ground in recent years, and in last year's voting at the International Whaling Commission (IWC) had almost enough support to overturn the ban. Meanwhile, Costa Rica had lost its right to vote because of arrears in dues to the organization, and a campaign promise to maintain the ban in Nicaragua seemed in jeopardy as the country mulled its relationship with aid-generous Japan.

Neither Costa Rica nor Nicaragua has any interest in whale hunting. For both, whales are worth considerably more alive as tourist attractions and image enhancers than dead. For the whales, Costa Rica is a critical destination. Six of the world's 13 species come to these coastal waters from the farthest ends of the earth to breed. Since 1989, the Parque Nacional Marino Ballena (PNMB) has been the foremost protected area in Latin America for this activity, principally for the humpback, the blue, and the minke whales.

Costa Rica takes a very parental view of the phenomenon. "The whales are born in Costa Rica, they are Costa Rican," says Arturo Carmona, PNMB director. "They travel more than 7,000 km from Antarctica, for example, to feed and then return to have their babies. Therefore, even though they are Ticas, they need passports and diplomatic immunity." The whales more than pay for their Costa Rican accommodations. Environmental organizations say the tourism industry on the Pacific coast profits handsomely from whale watchers foreign and domestic.

The communities of Uvita and Bahia Ballena used to be fishing villages but now have transformed their economies to serve tourists who want to see the giant creatures in their natural environment. Locals pretty much agree that life is better now. "We were all fishers here before, but now we have changed and this has permitted us to move forward," said Fernando Guerrero, owner of Dolphin Tours. "The community now depends on whale watching. Before we were subsisting; now we earn money, and we have investment and stable employment." Everyone in the towns, it seems, is working at a hotel or restaurant or some related business.

Environmentalists train the locals so that they conduct their activities in a responsible way that does not stress the animals during the birthing season. Townspeople are also aware of the geopolitics of endangered species. They strongly support continued bans on whale hunting. Costa Rica will have an opportunity to vote on that question at the next meeting of the IWC in May 2007. Costa Rica is a member of the IWC, but it lost its right to vote after failing to pay its dues to the organization since 1989. Last year's vote was too close for comfort, however. Of the 73 member countries, 35 voted to end the ban.

In February, Costa Rica entered into negotiations to retire its US\$312,000 debt. A down payment of about US\$35,000 restored the right to vote, with the promise of paying half the remainder by 2008 and the rest in 2009. Private businesses, environmental organizations, and individual citizens got up the first payment. The subsequent two larger payments are to be included in the coming budgets of the Ministry of Environment.

Environment Minister Roberto Dobles pledged a vote against lifting the ban. He expects a close contest regarding the issue. "It will be very close, so Costa Rica's vote could make the difference. Therefore we will attend, and we will say no to hunting whales." The government was nudged into its current stance by a campaign of the *Coalicion Costarricense por las Ballenas*, a coalition of more than 10 environmental organizations, including Greenpeace. The campaign got the support of the political parties, President Oscar Arias, and Dobles.

### *Nicaragua divided on whaling*

A whale-saving campaign is also brewing next door in Nicaragua, where the Club de Jovenes Ambientalistas (CJA) announced its intention to sensitize the populace to whaling and against dismantling the Southern Ocean Whale Sanctuary, established by the IWC in 1994. Japan voted against the sanctuary and has entered an objection to it with respect to the minke whale. The CJA is collecting citizen signatures to present to the presidency and to the legislature. President Daniel Ortega campaigned in favor of whale conservation in last year's elections, with explicit promises to the national environmental community, but that community now fears the president might go back on the promise to stay on the right side of Japan, a major contributor of aid to the impoverished nation.

Those fears escalated in February when it was revealed that Miguel Marengo, ex-director of the Administracion de Pesca y Acuicultura (ADPESCA), attended a meeting of pro-whaling IWC members under unusual circumstances. Marengo appeared at the meeting, a "normalization conference," as Nicaragua's representative, even though he was not authorized by the Foreign Relations Ministry. He went to Tokyo on his own, having requested vacation time off, but he was listed officially on conference records. He had been Nicaragua's representative to the IWC during the administration of former President Enrique Bolanos (2002-2007). Greenpeace investigated and suspects that Japan paid Marengo's expenses. The Foreign Relations Ministry confirmed that the Nicaraguan government did not pay for his travel.

Marengo denied participating in the meeting and said he had gone to shop his resume with former colleagues because his future in the current government is doubtful. He said he paid for the trip with free miles he has accumulated over the years. He said he would even work for Greenpeace, if they wanted him. Greenpeace waged an information campaign at the normalization conference in Japan with the slogan, normal is protection. Valentine's Day took place during the meeting, so the organization showed up at the meeting with a huge "love whales" card.

More seriously, Greenpeace director of oceanic projects Yunichi Sato told the media, "The meeting is centering on the rights of small countries to hunt whales on their coasts and is still not

discussing reforms in the IWC." He said Japan kills more than 1,200 whales a year, hiding the commercialization of whale meat under the pretext of scientific investigation. The Japanese Whaling Association defends harvesting the meat as "part of Japanese culture."

In Nicaragua, the official position remains unclear. Environmental Minister Amanda Lorio said that, until now, Nicaragua's position has been in favor of whaling, but that position has changed. She is opposed by the Federacion de Pescadores Artesanales (FENIPESCA), which wants the pro-whaling policy of Bolanos continued. Nicaraguans do not hunt whales, but, said the organization's president Cairo Laguna, "For us the [whale-saving actions] are misguided campaigns that seek profit for a network of environmentalists." Laguna said the country should not be represented at the IWC by the ministry but rather by the Instituto de Pesca y Acuicultura (Inspeca), because it is a fishing issue not an environmental one. He told reporters that his organization fears if whaling stays off-limits, turtle hunting would be next.

He said the notion that whales are at the point of extinction is false. Responding to a reporter's question about whether it would be better to promote the whales as protected tourist attractions, Laguna said that he had nothing against whale watching but that his organization was in favor of sustainable use of marine resources, and whaling is sustainable; the whales that visit the Nicaraguan Pacific coast are not threatened by whaling countries.

## *How it works*

Japan's motivation and strategy The IWC does not determine whether any particular species of whale is threatened. The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) does that. CITES will meet in the Netherlands just after the May IWC meetings. It follows the IWC lead on whales and would determine, based on IWC decisions, whether to ban trade on them. Japan has proposed a review at CITES on currently protected whales, including the humpback, blue, fin, and sperm, and could use the normalization determination to its advantage.

The reason that only pro-whaling countries showed up at the recent meeting in Japan is that the anti-whaling countries boycotted it. Despite a profound decline in consumption of whale meat in Japan, the country continues to defend hunting because, said Tetsu Sato, professor of environmental science at Nagano University, in a world of diminishing resources, establishing the right to consume any animal as long as the practice is sustainable is critical to Japan's long-term food security and the management of natural resources. He said, "Precisely because whaling attracts so much worldwide attention, Japan can't afford to lose." Sato supports whaling.

Reportedly, most biologists agree that certain species, including the minke, have recovered and are thriving. The disagreement is whether they can be harvested in a sustainable way or whether they are so abundant, as Japan asserts, that they threaten other marine animals.

As part of food-security policy, Japanese governments have promoted whale meat as a cultural issue even though history indicates the practice began only in the 1850s when Matthew Perry's Black Ships began securing the rights of US whalers for the whale-oil trade. In its forced modernization, Japan adopted US and Norwegian vessels and techniques. Some coastal towns were transformed

into whaling stations. More Japanese began eating whale meat, but it wasn't until after World War II, when a beaten Japan with few resources was encouraged by US occupation authorities to use the meat for school lunches, that it became part of Japanese everyday life.

Nowadays, said Ayako Okubo of the Ocean Policy Research Foundation, the cultural myth has taken root. "It's not because Japanese want to eat whale meat. It's because they don't like being told not to eat it by foreigners. Japan in fact, can't say no to America on many issues," he explained, but the whaling disagreement was implicitly tolerated by the US, so, "it's become like a form of stress release."

February's Conference for the Normalization of the International Whaling Commission ended with a document expressing strong dissatisfaction with the sharp divisions that have grown so severe as to prevent dialogue, as the boycott by anti-whaling countries reflected. What was intended was to "discuss and recommend specific measures to restore the IWC as an effective resource-management organization in accordance with its mandate prescribed by the 1946 International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling." The convention states its purpose is to "provide for the proper conservation of whale stocks and thus make possible the orderly development of the whaling industry."

If dialogue remains impossible, the question will be settled temporarily with the starkness of a vote among conservation advocates represented by the Costa Rican viewpoint, pro-whaling countries, and those who just don't like being told what to do, like Japan and Nicaragua's FENIPESCA.

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