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WE REMAIN AT THE FOREFRONT OF THE FIGHT FOR WHALE CONSERVATION

Japan is Australia's close friend and vital partner, but on whaling we disagree

JOSH FRYDENBERG

Whenever I speak to students about the work we are doing to protect the environment, the one topic that elicits a robust discussion is that of whales. Young people simply cannot understand why these majestic creatures of the sea — giant, gentle and mythologised in their reading lists with the story of Moby-Dick — are still hunted and killed by countries around the world. And they are right.

While the days of the industrial-scale catch are behind us, when nearly three million whales were killed between 1904 and

2000, there is still much to do. Many of the surviving populations, of the more than 30 different whale species, remain at precariously low levels. The number of Antarctic blue whale, the largest animal to ever have ruled the sea, shrank by more than 300,000 during the whaling era to a population today of just a few per cent of what it was. The western North Pacific grey whale is down to just 180, while the North Atlantic right whale numbers about 500.

For this reason, last week's meeting of the International

Whaling Commission in Slovenia's coastal city of Portoroz was very important. Bringing together almost 90 countries, including some that want to see an end to the 30-year moratorium on commercial whaling, it was a timely opportunity to discuss how to strengthen and modernise the commission. The commission is vital as the body that gives effect to the international whaling convention, which is in its 70th year.

Australia's role was key. When we signed on as one of the 15 founding members of the convention in 1946, Australia was a whaling nation. However, since 1978, when the Fraser government ceased whaling in Australian

waters, closing the last whaling station in Albany, successive governments of both political persuasions have been active on the world stage promoting whale conservation. This meeting was no different.

Australia successfully moved two resolutions, the first to deal with "scientific" whaling and the second to improve governance structures within the commission to make its operations more effective and modern.

Co-sponsored by New Zealand, our resolution on scientific whaling passed by 34 votes to 17 with several abstentions and will now ensure increased scrutiny by the commission of decisions by countries to grant permits to themselves to kill whales.

Last year Japan was able to issue itself a permit to take 333 minke whales from the Southern Ocean. This was a new Japanese program given that the International Court of Justice ruled in 2014 that Japan's previous program was invalid because the science couldn't justify the catch.

The bottom line is that despite our success at The Hague, Japan's scientific whaling goes on. Japan, a close friend of Australia, is a vital and strategic partner with us on so many issues, but on the issue of whaling we strongly disagree.

Australia's case for change is based on evidence that important scientific research can, and is, effectively undertaken by non-lethal means, including sophisticated underwater listening stations, acoustic tracking and satellite tagging. In short, you don't have to kill whales to study them.

Australia has also initiated and funded the 12-nation Southern Ocean Research Partnership, which includes the US, Brazil, New Zealand, France, Germany, Italy and a growing list of others to deploy research vessels, equipment

and scientific expertise to undertake these non-lethal research methods.

The second resolution Australia put forward at the meeting around governance reforms was co-sponsored by the US, New Zealand, Mexico and Brazil. It was passed with consensus. As an important multilateral treaty organisation, the commission needs to adopt best practice in resource allocation, work stream management and transparency,

and Australia's resolution was designed towards this end.

With Japan expected to be elevated from vice-chairman to chairman of the IWC at this meeting, many will be watching to see how effectively the commission runs.

Ocean sanctuaries have been another topic on the agenda, with Australia supporting a South American and African push for a new whale sanctuary in the South Atlantic. While a moratorium on commercial whaling may make sanctuaries less urgent than they were previously, they remain an important science-based initiative in the conservation strategy. They also help to promote a booming \$2 billion annual whale-watching industry that employs more than 13,000 people.

Unfortunately the vote for a South Atlantic sanctuary fell just short of the 75 per cent majority required. However, the proponents will not give up and are looking to resubmit the proposal at the next meeting.

Historical, cultural and commercial factors play a part in whaling negotiations but ultimately it is the conservation of these extraordinary creatures that should be foremost in our minds.

This is why Australia will continue its leadership role, recognising that whales are a critical part of the ecosystem and we need to do everything we can to protect them.



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the Environment and Energy and
was in Slovenia for the 66th
International Whaling
Commission meeting.*

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