

USA Gets Tough on Whales

Richard Fitter

The FPS Hon. Secretary reports on the International Whaling Commission's meeting in Washington which he attended on behalf of the Society. A major step forward was the decision to abolish the blue whale unit, but the quota fixed for the next season was again unrealistically high and the USA shows signs of losing patience.

This year's meeting of the International Whaling Commission held in Washington, DC, from June 21 to 25, marked a crucial point in the Commission's twenty-six years of existence, and could even be the last of the series. The US Government has at last lost patience with the endless procrastination and too-little-too-late proceedings of the Commission, and appears determined either to prod it into effectiveness or to make a fresh start. It has already placed most commercial whales on the Endangered Species List (which means that neither they nor any parts of them can be imported), and has announced its intention to issue no more licences to kill whales after the end of this year, thus demonstrating, as the Under-Secretary of State Alexis Johnson said in opening the conference, the view of the US people that the Commission had not acted either soon enough or forcefully enough to prevent the destruction of a valuable international resource.

In terms of the IWC's own deliberations two important decisions were made: to abolish the blue whale unit (BWU), and to limit the North Pacific whale catch by 20 per cent. Although the abolition of the BWU will enable fin and sei whale stocks to be managed separately in future, this change, with typical procrastination, was postponed until 1972/73. Typically also, the Commission was unable to agree a figure for the maximum sustainable yield of the fin whale in the Antarctic: at some point along the line capitalist economics has clashed with biological commonsense.

In the circumstances the actual statistics revealed by the Commission are of largely historical interest. In 1970/71 there were six (3 Japanese and 3 Russian) expeditions to the Antarctic (compared with seven, including one Norwegian, in 1969/70). They caught 2890 fin, 6193 sei and 2745 sperm whales; compared with the previous year this was 111 fewer fin, 297 more sei and 345 fewer sperm whales. Thus in 1969/70 the whalers fell short of their BWU quota by 223 units, and in 1970/71 by 230 units. Yet for 1971/72 the Commission has fixed the quota only 400 units lower, allowing virtually no margin for recovery of the stocks from their present low levels.

The International Observer Scheme, so long held up by administrative and other unnecessary obstacles, is not yet finally ruled out for 1971/72, and is to be rediscussed at a special meeting later this year.

Apology

We very much regret that in the final printing processes the caption to the excellent lion photograph on page 2 of the May issue of *Oryx* got lost, and with it the name of the photographer, Norman Myers.