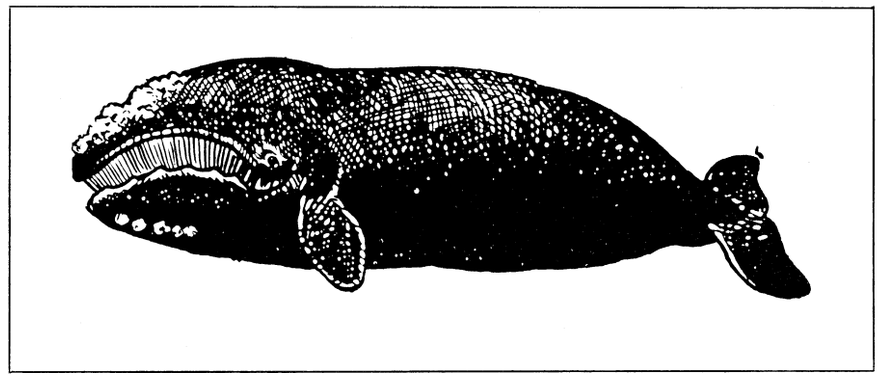
No whaling moratorium, but quota system set



Like many other marine animals, whales have been hunted so ambitiously that many species are in danger of extinction. On the endangered list published by the U.S. Department of the Interior are the bowhead, right, blue, sperm, finback, sei, humpback and gray whales. The United States has already halted all whaling by its nationals and banned importation of products, such as oil, from endangered species of whale.

But the U.S. whaling industry, as one observer notes, "amounted to zilch." Thus these moves, according to Robert M. White, director of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, were "a valiant gesture, but a feeble tool, for protecting the whales. The simple fact is that whales are caught by other nations, and our actions affect them not at all . . . we must face the fact that we alone cannot save the world's whales."

Cynics point out that the United States has nothing to lose by advocating bans on whaling. Nations such as the Soviet Union and Japan, which account for 80 percent of the total catch, would face loss of a major industry. They have naturally opposed whaling bans. U.S. observers believe such nations are not likely to agree to a total moratorium or ban on whaling. But there are indications that a phase-out of whaling, or at least strict controls, may be possible.

Delegates at last month's conference on the human environment in Stockholm recommended a 10-year moratorium on all commercial whaling and a large-scale research program to determine how this resource could be most successfully managed. The Stockholm conferees also recommended that the International Whaling Commission, a regulatory body established by a 1946 convention between 14 whaling nations, be strengthened.

Last week, at its annual meeting in London, the IWC rejected a moratorium on whaling. Japan, the Soviet Union and four other nations voted down the 10-year ban proposed by the United States and Great Britain. The IWC did take what David Wallace of NOAA, an adviser to the U.S. delegation, believes is an important step in the right direction. It set up quotas on total numbers of whales of each species and sex that can be caught each year. Separate quotas were established for the Northern and Southern Hemispheres because the two populations do not mix. Thus the quota for sperm whales, for example, is 6,000 males and 4,000 females for the North Pacific and 8,000 males and 5,000 females for the Southern Hemisphere.

The IWC had previously set quotas for the North Pacific, but the quotas were applied to total numbers of a given species, regardless of sex. The trouble with this system, says another U.S. adviser, Prudence Fox of NOAA, was that the proportion of males to females is important. The sperm whale, for example, is a harem animal, and though some excess of males over females may safely be taken, males were in practice being "overfished." Part of the problem was that the commission had set size limits on whales that could be caught—a minimum of 35 feet for coastal waters and 38 feet for the deep ocean—and females are much smaller than males. In addition, whalers had claimed they couldn't tell the difference between males and females in the water. The result was that almost all the sperm whales caught were males. The IWC has now adopted the view, long held by cetologists, that the size difference between males and females does allow identification of a whale's sex. To enable whalers to catch greater proportions of females, the size minimum was lowered to 30 feet.

The North Pacific quotas will take effect in 1973; those for the Southern Hemisphere, in November of this year when the Antarctic whaling season begins. The quotas set were the total number for all nations. The IWC has no authority to set limits for individual nations. The nations will have to decide among themselves how the allotments are to be divvied up.

The IWC also called for an International Decade of Cetacean Research. Wallace estimates that the study, to be coordinated by the IWC, will begin in about a year. In accordance with a scheme adopted by the commission a year ago, member nations are admitting impartial observers to inspect whale catches and report to the IWC species, size, sex and number of whales caught.

Two U.S. representatives are already observing whale catches in Japan. Japan, the Soviet Union and Norway plan to exchange observers, as do Norway, Canada and Iceland.

Another encouraging sign, says Fox, is that the IWC agreements reached last week were all in complete accord with the recommendations of the commission's scientific committee, which reports on the sustainable yield for each whale species. In the past, the commission hadn't adhered closely to the committee's findings, setting quotas higher than recommended.

In fact, the quota for one species of whale, the finback whale, was set even lower than recommended. Sustainable yields recommended were 3,200 for the Antarctic area and 900 to 1,000 for the North Pacific. These were reduced to, respectively, 1,950 and 650. Furthermore, the countries now fishing finback whales have committed themselves to reducing these numbers still more in the future.

Some conservationist groups, in particular the Friends of the Earth, view rejection of an absolute moratorium as a major setback, scoring the "lackadaisical, uninterested" attitude of delegates to the IWC. Both Wallace and Fox, on the other hand, are encouraged by the recent IWC actions. The United States is not satisfied, though, Wallace says. "We'll be pressing for more and more protection." What was accomplished at London, he says, is that "we have changed the tenor of the meetings. They're thinking more about conservation aspects, and that's what we want." □

High-energy observatory

The High Energy Astronomy Observatory (HEAO) is finally off the drawing boards (SN: 1/29/72, p. 77). Last week, NASA awarded the $83.6 million contract to TRW Systems, Inc. of Redondo Beach, Calif.

The contract calls for the development of two automated observatories, each 11.5 meters long and three meters in diameter. Each will carry 13 instruments to get high-resolution data on high energy X-ray and gamma-ray sources and the cosmic ray flux.

The first HEAO, scheduled for launch in 1975, will be placed into a 370-kilometer circular orbit. If all goes well with HEAO I, the second observatory will be launched about 18 months later. Follow-on high energy observatories are still in the study phase. □