

MARK CARWARDINE



On the wild thoughts that won't let him sleep. This month:

The politics of whaling

The Icelandic government has just announced its new whaling quotas:

229 minke whales and 154 Endangered fin whales will be harpooned each year for the next five years.

Iceland, Norway and Japan have made a mockery of the 1986 moratorium on commercial whaling for decades, using loopholes in the regulations of the International Whaling Commission to kill as many as they want.

But why do it? Why fly in the face of so much anger and opposition from the rest of the world and, indeed, from within their own countries?

It's not because of a growing market for whale meat: demand is actually falling while stockpiles are growing. And it's not for economic reasons: whaling is subsidised by the governments of Norway and Japan, while just one stubborn and, politically, very powerful whaler in Iceland stands to make any profit.

In truth, it's more about patriotism plus, inevitably, some political point-scoring and surprisingly little to do with whales. It's easy for governments to stomp about, defending national pride against unwelcome foreign pressure, over something as insignificant (on the world stage) as whaling. And this helps to explain why the more we put pressure on Iceland,

Norway and Japan to stop, the less they are inclined to do so.

Whale watching must be the long-term solution. Worth \$2 billion a year, and involving 3,300 operators in 119 countries, it offers the alternative to the wastefulness of commercial whaling.

But even conservation groups can't agree on how we persuade – or force – the last three whaling nations to swallow their pride. Their policies range from direct action and zero tolerance to

Whale watching is better than hunting.



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leaving them alone in the hope that they'll see the light. Nothing seems to work.

The irony is that if, instead of new quotas, Iceland had announced that it was going to stop whaling altogether, it would have been the toast of the world.

Mark Carwardine is a zoologist, photographer, writer, conservationist and BBC TV presenter.