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WORLD'S WHALES BREATHE EASIER

An historic ruling handed down by the UN's highest court has laid to rest the ludicrous myth that Japan has been hunting whales for scientific research. The rest of us have always known that scientific whaling is a blatant lie – a thinly veiled cover for commercial whaling – but now, at last, it's official.

By a vote of 12–4, the panel of judges at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ordered Japan to cease its scientific whaling programme in the Southern Ocean Sanctuary, with immediate effect.

Thanks to the Australian government, which began legal proceedings in June 2010, the Japanese can no longer sidestep the worldwide ban on commercial whaling or make a mockery of the Antarctic whale sanctuary.

So what happens now?

In the short term, Japan has confirmed that it will accept the verdict (and, fortunately, the court's judgments cannot be appealed). But in the longer term, it's hard to predict what will happen.

Japan may try to carry on whaling in the Southern Ocean through

another loophole or under a different name outside of the UN's ruling. I think that this is unlikely, unless the country leaves the International Whaling Commission (IWC). But anything is possible given the government's notoriously underhand tactics at the IWC.

But the new ruling does not mean an end to all whaling. Apart from Norway and Iceland

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(which hunt whales commercially in the North Atlantic) Japan takes a significant number of whales in the North Pacific, also under the guise of scientific whaling.

It is possible that the Australian government could take similar legal action against this activity, and it's also possible that the ICJ would reach a similar conclusion.

But whatever happens, this ruling is huge. For the first time in years, I think that we can feel cautiously optimistic about the future of the world's whales.