



Mark Carwardine's **AT A GLANCE...**

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ABORIGINAL SUBSISTENCE WHALING

WHAT IS ABORIGINAL SUBSISTENCE WHALING?

The International Whaling Commission (IWC) recognises three types of whaling: commercial, scientific and aboriginal. Norway and Iceland hunt commercially, while Japan uses the highly controversial loophole permitting member countries to kill whales for so-called scientific research. Aboriginal subsistence whaling requires that whaling must be central to the cultural and nutritional needs of the hunters, they must have a long and uninterrupted history of whaling, and the resulting meat and products must be used exclusively for local consumption (not for commercial purposes).

WHO DOES ABORIGINAL WHALING?

Under the auspices of the IWC, the USA, Russia, Greenland and the Caribbean island of Bequia in St Vincent and the Grenadines.

HOW MANY WHALES ARE BEING KILLED?

More than 10,000 great whales have been killed by aboriginal whalers since 1985 (compared with more than 40,000 by commercial and scientific whalers). Maximum catch limits are set by the IWC in six-year blocks but, in simple terms, for 2017 these equate to: 67 bowhead whales by Alaska, with small numbers by Russia; 140 grey whales by Russia (and, in theory though not in practice, by the Makah tribe in Washington State); 12 minke whales by East Greenland; two

bowhead whales, 10 humpback whales, 19 fin whales and 164 minke whales by West Greenland; and approximately four humpback whales by St Vincent and the Grenadines.

WHAT ABOUT WHALES THAT ARE KILLED BUT NOT RETRIEVED?

After many years of campaigning by conservation groups – worried that catch limits did not provide strong incentives for hunters to land all the whales they strike – quotas now specify the number of strikes instead. In other words, if a whale is hit with a harpoon (or shot with a rifle, in the case of Greenland) that counts towards the quota – regardless of whether or not it's actually landed. This does not apply to Bequia or Russia.

IS ALL ABORIGINAL HUNTING MANAGED BY THE IWC?

No. Canada withdrew from the IWC in 1982, but allows four bowhead whales to be taken by the Inuit every year. Indonesia has never been a member of the IWC, but allows hunters from the remote villages of Lamalera and Lamakera to take 10–20 sperm whales every year.

WHAT ABOUT THE FAROESE PILOT WHALE HUNT?

There are many other forms of whaling that target smaller species and are not regulated



Inuits in Alaska gather around a bowhead whale as it is flensed.

by the IWC (or by any other form of international control). These include the Faroese pilot whale hunt, the Taiji dolphin hunt in Japan, narwhal hunting in Arctic Canada and many others. Tens of thousands of small whales, dolphins and porpoises are killed every year in these hunts, although the true extent of the problem is unknown.

WHY IS ABORIGINAL WHALING SO CONTROVERSIAL?

There are several reasons. The IWC uses a less precautionary approach to setting aboriginal quotas and there's concern that some are too high. Recent commercial sales of whale products obtained during traditional hunts in Greenland (and Canada) have blurred the lines between commercial and aboriginal whaling. Some communities no longer depend on whale products to survive (they import western food, for example). Due to marine pollution, many whale products are so full of toxins that they're considered dangerous to eat. Also the killing methods used on aboriginal hunts are often even less humane than those used on commercial hunts.

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MARK CARWARDINE is a frustrated and frank conservationist.

● Every month he demystifies some of the most important issues affecting the world's wildlife and assesses the organisations that protect it.

WHAT NEXT?

Aboriginal whaling will be discussed again – and new quotas set – at the next IWC meeting in Brazil in 2018. 📧

● Find out more about the IWC at <https://iwc.int>

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