

Commission to keep whaling moratorium

- Debate to be refought next year
- Value of scientific whaling disputed

London

THE International Whaling Commission (IWC) decided to keep the moratorium on commercial whaling in place for at least another year at its annual meeting in Nordwijk, the Netherlands, last week. Iceland and Japan failed to win approval from the commission for commercial quotas for minke whales but catches as part of 'scientific research' programmes will continue, despite the opposition of most IWC members.

Iceland had asked for a commercial quota of 200 minke whales in the central north Atlantic Ocean and Japan for 50 in the Okhotsk Sea. The minke is the smallest of the great whales and was the last to be hunted.

The Icelandic and Japanese requests had been expected as the moratorium, which came into effect in 1986, was set for revision this year. But the timetable for revision incorrectly assumed that the procedure by which catch quotas were set would be overhauled successfully by 1990.

All agree that a new system is necessary. Quotas depend on accurate population estimates, and information on whales' rate of reproduction. But these estimates are notoriously inaccurate, so that even catches within an agreed quota might drive a managed stock to extinction.

The IWC's scientific committee has produced a shortlist of procedures that may produce quotas that will protect stocks from overexploitation. But repeated computer simulations of their effects on whale populations are still needed.

The three main whaling nations — Japan, Iceland and Norway — accept that a comprehensive review of the commercial moratorium will have to wait until the 1991 IWC meeting in Reykjavik, Iceland. But Lars Walløe, scientific adviser to the Norwegian delegation, believes the anti-whaling nations will delay the adoption of a revised quota system there.

Irrespective of any political pressure, Phil Hammond, a UK delegate to the scientific committee, doubts if a new quota system will be in place in time for Reykjavik. Scientists are uncertain of the geographical boundaries between genetically distinct stocks of minke whales, and have to develop a quota system that will not threaten individual stocks, irrespective of where the boundaries lie.

Even if the new quota system is ready by next year, the anti-whaling majority of IWC members is likely to vote to maintain the moratorium. The whaling nations may

then carry out their long-standing threat to leave the IWC.

The controversial issue of whaling carried out in the name of scientific research is a more immediate concern. The scientific committee, meeting before the full IWC meeting, as usual disagreed over the merit of this year's research proposals. Like the full IWC, the committee is influenced by political considerations, with scientists representing the interests of whaling nations clashing with a committed core of anti-whaling biologists.

Debate over a Norwegian proposal to take five minke whales in the Barents Sea (to add to the 46 taken in the last two years) centred around the 'multi-species model' that Norway says will help the sustainable management of Barents Sea whaling and fisheries. Norwegian biologists plan to combine data on minke whale digestion and energetics with similar data for other species, to model feeding interactions.

But some members of the scientific committee doubt if the whale data, with such small sample sizes, will be useful. Sidney Holt, scientific adviser to the Seychelles delegation, argued that the Norwegians should first develop their model, and examine how the whale data will affect it, before taking more whales.

The much larger and ongoing Japanese programme on Antarctic minkes (see *Nature* 344, 189; 15 March 1990) was the source of more disagreement. As in the past two years, Japan plans to take 300 minke whales, to estimate the age structure of the population.

Doug Butterworth, from the University of Cape Town, a scientific committee member not attached to any national delegation, presented analyses indicating that the Japanese data may be useful, allowing future quotas to be set with greater accuracy. But again, some biologists argued that the sample sizes are too small to estimate age structure. The committee needs a convincing analysis of the margin of error surrounding the age structure estimates, but is not satisfied that the Japanese have provided this. Although a catch of 300 minkes will not seriously deplete the overall Antarctic population (estimated at about 750,000), some biologists believe that the analysis should precede further catches.

Fukuzo Nagasaki, scientific adviser to the Japanese delegation, agrees that a sample of 300 minkes is "rather small", but says accurate age structure data will be

Reduction request

London

THE IWC, concerned about the huge catch of dolphins and porpoises in Japanese waters, has asked Japan to reduce its catch of Dall's porpoise to below 10,000 animals a year — the number taken in 1986. A report from the British pressure group, the Environmental Investigation Agency, published last month, estimated that at least 50,000 dolphins and porpoises are now killed each year off the Japanese coast.

Since the moratorium on commercial great whale catches came into effect in 1986, the shortage of whalemeat for the Japanese market has made porpoise meat a precious commodity, increasing the Dall's porpoise catch to about 40,000 per year in 1988. Although the 1989 catch was somewhat reduced, at around 30,000 animals, this figure still "must be unsustainable", according to one participant in last week's meeting. The entire population of Dall's porpoise in Japanese waters was estimated at only about 100,000 individuals in 1986.

But the resolution, proposed by a number of anti-whaling countries including the United Kingdom, can at most be described only as a forceful request. Fukuzo Nagasaki, scientific adviser to the Japanese delegation, acknowledges that the Dall's porpoise is a genuine concern. But he offers little hope that the new resolution will be obeyed. Although the Japanese government is trying to reduce catches, Nagasaki says, the fishery operates through a system of licences for boats, rather than fixed quotas.

A quota system would take "a long time" to implement, he says.

The Nordwijk meeting also passed a resolution asking IWC's scientific committee to gather information on the size of small cetacean stocks around the world, with the aim of presenting a report to the UN conference of environment and development in 1992. Peter Aldhous

collected in five or six years.

The full IWC meeting asked both Norwegian and Japanese governments to "reconsider" their permits for scientific whaling. Nagasaki says that some minor amendments to the research are possible, but the catch will go ahead. The IWC's constitution allows members to take scientific catches, irrespective of IWC resolutions.

The anti-scientific whaling lobby did gain a small victory, however, when a Soviet proposal to take up to 70 minkes and 30 fin whales in the Okhotsk Sea was withdrawn. The Soviet plan was received poorly by the scientific committee, as the aims and methods of the research were unclear, and no Soviet scientists attended to explain the research. Peter Aldhous