OLD WORLD

Whaling Commission still in Trouble

THE International Whaling Commission celebrates its quarter centenary this year. And trailing its past history of decisions taken too late or not taken at all, the commission is in London again to debate the future of the whale.

The scene is much like last year's. Friends of the Earth are picketing, the press is clamouring to be let in, the scientists are cautiously producing their advice, and the commissioners are there to ensure that whaling continues.

The proposal for the ten year moratorium on all whaling will be discussed again and rejected again, the commission will agree to make further efforts to get the whaling countries that are not members of the IWC (Brazil, Portugal, Spain, Chile and North Korea) to join, and more noises will be made about strengthening the commission's machinery (a permanent secretariat will almost certainly be established). At the end of the day some progress will have been made.

As the week began the scientific committee had still not completed its assessment of the current situation, nor produced its recommendations. But it is plain that the committee will come out against a total moratorium (so long as certain species are protected there is no harm in exploiting healthy stocks, it argues), but it will suggest that the fin whale be better protected.

The fin is the largest of the baleen whales that the commission members still hunt. Quotas set for it in the Antarctic and North Pacific for the 1972–73 season were 1,950 and 650 respectively, a catch that was exceeded in the North Pacific by 108, but not met in the Antarctic by 189. Stocks of the whale are heavily depleted, and it is calculated by the scientists that the species will have to be left unfished for 23 years for it to return to its maximum sustainable yield (MSY)—the maximum number that can be taken from any population without depleting the stocks.

At present the scientists estimate that 3,000 fins could be taken in the Antarctic without damaging the stocks further, but many more could be harvested if the fin is allowed to recover unhunted. It is therefore on the cards—although rather an outside possibility—that the conference will agree to a moratorium on the fin whale.

Dr Robert White, Director of the United States National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, opened the bid for a moratorium on all whaling on the first day of the meeting. He went on to say that "placing the fin whale under a complete moratorium is the most urgent matter before this commission". Mr Michael Stodart, Minister of State for Agriculture, Fisheries and Foods, also put the weight of the British delegation behind the moratorium on the fin whale. Without actually calling for a ban in so many words, he said "if this species is to recover to its maximum sustainable yield as fast as we would wish, the commission must be prepared to take much more stringent conservation measures. Indeed we believe that this is the species with the strongest case for a moratorium".

The scientific committee's views will not actually include a recommendation

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POLLEN

Keep on Counting

IT'S been a good year for pollen and a bad one for hay fever so far. But, in spite of the estimated three million sneezing individuals spread across Britain, the pollen count has not been as high this year as it has in the past.

This year's record count to date—on June 19—rose to 351, the highest level for two years. But the largest figure in the records of the Asthma Research Council, which faithfully keeps the daily count from the roofs of Paddington, is a massive 820, recorded on June 17, 1964.

The pollen that causes all the trouble is grass pollen. Records are also kept of the amounts of tree, flower and nettle pollen in the atmosphere, but they are not published daily. Relatively few people are allergic to them. But some three million people are allergic to grass pollens—and nobody knows why. There are, literally, thousands of different allergies found, but grass pollen is the commonest. Of the unlucky three million, some 0.5 million need medical treatment. Once the particular pollen or pollens that are setting up the allergy have been identified (no easy task as there are hundreds of different grasses), a desensitizing vaccine can be given and the suffering eased. Which is of little comfort to the majority of those allergic, who snuffle away all summer whenever the pollen count creeps up around the 100 mark but who aren't ill enough to go to a doctor.

But although this year does not hold the record for a high pollen count, the levels found during the recent heatwave were unusually high, particularly for mid-June. Normally pollen is released from early June to August, and the count tends to rise steadily, peaking in July. This year, however, damp weather in May and early June held the release of pollen back, and when the heatwave arrived the pollen sacs in the grasses were loaded, so that when the Sun finally burst them more pollen than usual was released at one time. One reason why so many people who normally do not suffer from hay fever were affected this year may be the speed at which the pollen count rose, defeating the body's immunity response which can build up resistance to the pollen if the quantities in the atmosphere accumulate slowly.

Nonetheless, the pollen count is highly elastic. Once the pollen is in the atmosphere it tends to stay there until it is flushed out by heavy rain. Thus the count was 351 on Tuesday 19, but only 3 on Thursday 21 following the heavy rain of last week. Friday's warm Sun had the count up to 69 again. Light showers will do little to shift the pollen in the air and will only encourage the grasses to produce more.

The count is taken with a spore machine that takes air in against a sticky microscope slide that revolves once every twenty-four hours. The pollen sticks to the slide and the grains are counted at noon each day, with the final count being the average number of grains found per cubic metre of air over twenty-four hours.

Although the Asthma Research Council's count is actually taken in London, it is held to be reasonably accurate for the whole of the home counties as pollen is so light that it can be blown miles once it has been released.

The Asthma Research Council counts the pollen largely because hay fever is a closely related disease to asthma. The council spends £41,000 a year on asthma research, including in its work studies on hay fever and other allergies. Research has revealed that the excreta from house dust mites are a chief cause of asthma; the researchers have also come up with the rather depressing conclusion that while many adolescents grow out of hay fever, a number of adults progress in middle age from hay fever to asthma.