

## Whale preservation: more than ever a key issue for Belgium

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**As of 2004 the Federal Public Service of Health, Food Chain Safety and Environment represents our country in the International Whaling Commission (IWC). This year's meeting of the Commission took place in Panama, from July 2nd until July 6th. On that occasion our country was elected to the vice-chairmanship, which might be an indication that it could access to the chair of this commission in 2014.**

This year's IWC meeting was particularly important for the credibility of the institution, oscillating between countries for and against whaling ever since the moratorium on commercial whaling was established. Belgium, represented by the Directorate-general for the Environment of the FPS of Health and its new commissioner Frédéric Chemay, belongs to the countries that fight for strict limitations and regulations to all whaling activity, and advocates an agenda for the conservation of cetaceans. In 2011, more than 1600 whales were hunted worldwide.

The creation of a new sanctuary in the south Atlantic dominated this meeting's debates. However this initiative could not be ratified given the veto of certain pro-whaling countries. Belgium and the countries of the European Union voted for this creation, offering 'universal coverage' to cetaceans in the existing sanctuaries (Indian Ocean and Austral Ocean), along the migration routes and in the areas intended for whales to reproduce and feed.

The hunting quotas covering the needs of local populations were at the highlight of discussions. The quotas granted to certain aboriginal populations were extended by vote. However, participants were divided on the request by Denmark to increase Greenland's quotas by 100 tons, as the current quotas of 570 tons have not all expired and feed the whale meat business far beyond the local market needs. After long negotiations these quotas were refused.

Environmental, health and animal welfare matters were also discussed during the meeting. The goal was to promote the research on sanitary impact, thus legitimising the need of hunting limitations and consumption restrictions on more and more contaminated and infected meat. Furthermore, the WHO will soon be alerted to this issue.

Since the hunting moratorium was established in 1986, new factors related to human activity threaten the survival of several cetacean species: climate change, chemical pollution, submarine noise pollution, as well as collisions with vessels and marine debris.

It was Belgium's previous commissioner Alexandre de Lichtervelde, who died in 2011 and whose memory was honoured during the meeting, who initiated the IWC's activities regarding the impact of collisions with vessels. This week our country was confirmed to chair this working group. A strategic plan will be developed in order to limit permission and quota granting, considering all the (scientifically analysed) pressures on cetaceans – including collisions with vessels. Belgium will also continue to bring the collisions' issue on the agenda of the International Maritime Organisation.

Finally our country opposed to the development of all new types of scientific or coastal whaling.

During this first week of July, the IWC confirmed to be the spearhead in the struggle for cetacean protection, animal welfare and sustainable whaling management.

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