

# Whales are doing well so it's time to scrap the body that once protected them, says former head

The International Whaling Commission has become a 'zombie' and should vote to disband itself, insists Peter Bridgewater

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A humpback whale breaching among icebergs at Ilulissat Icefjord, a Unesco world heritage site, in Greenland. Photograph: Juan Maria Coy Vergara/Getty Images

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eter Bridgewater has a clear message for the International Whaling Commission (IWC) that he once led. The organisation – which played a critical role in ending

whale hunting in the 1980s – has become a zombie institution that should vote to disband itself at its meeting next month.

“The commission did great work, but that was last century,” Bridgewater told the *Observer* last week. “Today it has – like so many other international conventions or organisations – outlived its useful life and should be quietly disbanded.”

This point was stressed by Bridgewater – who chaired the IWC from 1994 to 1997 – in a comment article published in *Nature* last week and which was written with several other conservationists including Rakhyun Kim, of the Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development at Utrecht University, and Robert Blasiak of the Stockholm Resilience Centre.



Norwegian whalers at a whaling station in South Georgia in 1932. Photograph: Liborio Justo/ Getty Images

“The IWC will hold its 69th meeting in Lima in September,” they state in their article. “We propose that it hands over several pending issues to other conventions and national governments and then closes up shop.”

It is an extraordinarily robust demand. Nevertheless, the group states that such a move is urgently needed – to set an example over the futures of the thousands of other international environmental organisations that exist today.



A minke whale. Photograph: Kerstin Meyer/Getty Images

Many of these bodies have had little impact collectively, but expend millions of dollars annually on secretariats and meeting and use up time and resources from governments, state Bridgewater and his colleagues. Examples include the Montreal protocol, which monitors ozone depletion. Its residual tasks could easily be carried out by other UN bodies, they say.

“Proud legacies and historical achievements are important, but allowing institutions to become zombies serves no one,” say Bridgewater and colleagues.

The International Whaling Commission was originally set up to “provide for the proper development of whale stocks and thus make possible the orderly development of the whaling industry”. However, as environmental concerns grew and numbers of the great whales – including the gray, humpback, right, sperm, bowhead and minke whales – plummeted as their slaughter, in their tens of thousands a year, was allowed to continue, the commission decided in 1982 that all commercial whaling should cease by the 1985-6 season.

Those accomplishments are laudable but lie four decades in the past, say the group. “IWC meetings since have been a source of acrimonious and fruitless dialogue among member nations. By exiting with dignity, the IWC would set a powerful example for the international environmental community.”



A whaler in America uses a harpoon gun in 1971. Photograph: Bettmann Archive

Studies of whale populations make it clear that virtually all species are now increasing. Humpback numbers have risen sharply, along with blue and minke whales. The main exception is the North Atlantic right whale, which has suffered badly from vessel strikes and entanglement in fishing gear.

However, the rest of the world’s whales are doing well, said Bridgewater. “Species numbers have bounced back since the moratorium to varying degrees levels. And that is the point of our message to the IWC: ‘You have done your job.

It's been really good work. You have got a result. Now it is time to hang up things and go with dignity.”

Only three countries currently carry out whaling: Norway, Iceland and Japan. “These involve just a small number of catches,” added Bridgewater. “Crucially, the IWC has made no impact in halting whaling by these nations.”



The kindest cut: the Australians fighting to save humpback whales tangled in fishing nets

Instead, the commission's work could easily be handled by the Convention of International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), it is argued. As the group points out, whaling is not the main threat to whales today. “These are ship strikes, pollution and climate change.”

In response to the article in *Nature*, a spokesman for the IWC last week defended the commission and pointed out that it had evolved to address a range of important cetacean science, conservation and management issues since its creation.

“These include – but are not limited to – entanglement and bycatch in fishing gear (which is the biggest threat, estimated to kill more than 300,000 cetaceans every year), collisions with vessels, strandings, marine debris, and of course the world-leading and wide-ranging programme of the IWC Scientific Committee, which includes assessments of whale populations around the world.”