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Humpback whales appear off Australia

By environment correspondent **Alex Kirby**

The International Whaling Commission has ended its meeting in Adelaide by voting to maintain the present moratorium on commercial whaling - for the time being.

But in a highly significant move, it has also agreed to speed up draft rules for the control of the hunt once it is allowed to resume.

The rules, known collectively as the revised management scheme (RMS), will have to be completed by July 2001, when the IWC next meets. Japan, one of the two countries which still kill whales, is cautiously jubilant.

The RMS will set science-based levels at which different whale species can be caught, using calculations such as birth and mortality rates.

'Feet dragging'

The moratorium has been in force since 1986. The Japanese and the Norwegians both want an end to it and say the IWC has been dragging its feet for years on the RMS.

They say that most Commission members are so opposed to any whales being killed that they have simply refused to discuss the RMS seriously.

A Japanese spokesman in Adelaide, Joji Morishita, said after the vote on the RMS: "We saw some progress. The proposal is a good indication towards the resumption of commercial whaling."

There were reassurances for the conservationists that the

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agreement did not mean an immediate return to commercial whaling.

Professor Bo Fernholm, the Swedish commissioner, who moved the resolution, said: "That's something that comes afterwards - it depends on what form the scheme takes eventually.

"We have to have options available to get control of what is actually going on. We are unhappy with the present situation, where the whaling occurs without IWC control."

Credibility gap

Last month, the secretary of the IWC, Dr Ray Gambell, told BBC News Online: "Whaling is going on at a commercial level. It's outside IWC control.

"I would think it much better that it was brought within international regulations and oversight. I think the commission will need to move forward on measures which would allow controlled whaling, otherwise it will lose credibility.

"If the commission cannot set its house in order, people will start to ask: 'Why do we need it at all?'"

After the meeting, Dr Gambell said the ending of the moratorium was "possible within the foreseeable future".

There are several outstanding issues to be resolved, including who should pay for observers and inspectors on whaling vessels, and how to track whale meat on the market. DNA techniques may allow that problem to be resolved.

Catch plans

The IWC is expected to hold a special meeting in February to try to agree the final form of the RMS, which will then be put to the July meeting, to be held in London. To be accepted there, it will have to be agreed by 75% of the members present.

Japan plans to catch 540 minke whales in Antarctic waters this year, using an IWC rule which allows unlimited catches of any species in the name of scientific research. It also plans to kill 50 Bryde's and 10 sperm whales.

The whalers acknowledge that many people in Japan like to eat whale meat. Norway plans to kill 655 North Atlantic minke whales this year. It objected to the moratorium and so is allowed to ignore it.

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