

# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

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## SECRETARY HICKEL BANS IMPORTS OF PRODUCTS FROM EIGHT ENDANGERED SPECIES OF WHALES

Secretary of the Interior Walter J. Hickel announced today he has placed eight species of whales on his Department's Endangered Species List, as a first step in preventing their worldwide extinction.

The list includes the finback, sei, and sperm whales--which are now the only species seriously sought by commercial whalers--as well as the rarer bowhead, blue, humpback, right, and gray whales.

In effect, the Secretary's order means that oil, meat and any other products from these species cannot be imported into the United States.

"The decision will be controversial because certain interests have urged that we hold off listing the fin, sei and sperm whales until it is actually proven that they are on the verge of extinction," Secretary Hickel said.

"But it is the clear intent of the Endangered Species Conservation Act, which took effect June 3, 1970, that we prevent conditions that lead to extinction. It is also clear that if the present rate of commercial exploitation continues unchecked, these three species will become as rare as the other five.

"We are not going to wait until all these species are on the brink of extinction before we take positive action," Secretary Hickel declared.

Instead, he said, the ban will take effect while further actions are pending:

1. A symposium of the world's leading scientists on whale biology will be called jointly by the Interior Department and the Smithsonian Institution this winter to review what can be done to restore whale populations in the world's oceans.

2. The International Whaling Commission will be called upon to develop more effective means of protecting the finback, sei, and sperm whales. The United States is a member and strong supporter of the Commission. Although there is virtually no U. S. whaling industry remaining, this country uses about 30 percent of world whale products.

The import ban takes effect as soon as it is published in the Federal Register. It was proposed by the Department on July 30, and comments were invited.

Special permits will be issued by the Secretary for up to 12 months if existing importers of whale products can show they will suffer economic hardship. This will allow whales already caught to be marketed.

"Soap, margarine, beauty cream, machine oil, and pet food are all useful products, but they do not require endangering the survival of the world's mightiest creature," he said, urging that effective substitutes be developed to replace the whale products used as ingredients.

He noted that the principal use of sei and finback whale products in this country is for cat food.

Sperm whale oil is a highly prized ingredient in certain industries, Secretary Hickel acknowledged, but even this consideration is outweighed by the danger of extinction. He said it would be far better to devise substitutes now than after irreversible harm is done.

Principal whale "fisheries" (the whale, of course, is a mammal) are in the Antarctic and North Pacific.

"I have said many times that the greatest challenge of the 1970's is to prevent further damage to our environment," the Secretary said. "We must learn use without abuse of our natural resources--especially the unique living ones.

"It is far cheaper to take preventive action now than to try to repair damage once it has been done, damage that may be beyond recall."

The Secretary said he was hopeful that the International Whaling Commission could develop realistic whaling quotas and could provide objective, international observers to ensure the wise management of this great resource on a sustained yield basis. "As soon as such effective controls are in operation, we will delist those species which no longer appear to be headed for extinction," he said.

"I take this action because I feel it necessary to influence the whaling nations to review their outlook, rebuild whale breeding stocks, and institute effective international control to save this priceless resource."

Trends in the whaling industry give ample cause for alarm, the Secretary said.

During the peak year of 1930-31, whalers took almost 30,000 blue whales, the mightiest creature ever to inhabit the earth. Now only a maximum of 3,000, by the highest estimate, are believed to survive worldwide. They have been protected since 1965, but their numbers are so low that death rates from natural and accidental causes may be much greater than the birth rate. There is reason to doubt that enough males and females will find each other in the great oceans to keep the species alive.

Similar fates have overtaken the humpback whale, and the bowhead and two species of right whale. Only the gray whale, after decades of complete protection, has made a partial recovery along our Pacific Coast; unlike the others, it is able to congregate and to breed in the shallow, coastal waters of Baja California.

As the larger whales become less plentiful, the smaller ones are hunted, and more of the creatures must be killed to produce the same quantity of products.

The 80-foot fin whale was harvested at over 30,000 animals a year in the Antarctic in the early 1960's. Now these waters yield only about 2,500 a year. So the whalers have turned to the smaller sei and sperm whales, with more and more immature specimens being taken to make the enterprise pay off.

"Whales are the largest, the most exciting and among the most intelligent of the creatures of the sea," Secretary Hickel said. "They are a wonderful heritage and we must not exterminate them. Yet we humans threaten to do just that-- hunting them with radar and helicopters, using factory ships that can dispose of an 80-ton carcass in 30 minutes.

"No animal can survive that kind of technology," he said. "The life span of a sperm whale, for instance, may be 75 years. The female is not mature enough to reproduce until she is 9 or 10 years old, and then usually produces only one calf every four years. This is a renewable resource, but like growing redwood trees, it takes time to renew.

"Effective worldwide management is the way, and we will do all we can to make it work."

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