

US The US Navy has admitted that it probably caused the deaths of at least six beaked whales and the stranding of 10 more cetaceans in the Bahamas in March 2000 (News, July 2000, June 2001). A report published by the National Marine Fisheries Service, in conjunction with the navy, said the incident occurred "within 24 hours of US ships using active midrange sonar for an unusually extended period" and that this appears to have caused some kind of "acoustic or impulse trauma." www.nmfs.noaa.gov

CAMBODIA The government suspended all logging operations from 1 January after it concluded that none of the companies had reached standards set in terms of sustainable forestry practices. Campaigning group Global Witness has applauded the move but says the government should now go further and eject all logging companies – mostly Russian, Chinese, Japanese, Taiwanese and Malaysian as well as joint venture groups – out of the country. www.globalwitness.org

GULF OF MEXICO Scientists have seen and photographed a giant squid that may belong to a whole new family that has never been classified. The squid was unusual in having extremely long, slender arms that are slightly kinked, as if they have elbows, and fins that extend beyond the end of the body. One specimen was estimated to be more than six metres long. The 'Mystery Squid', as it has become known, has been seen before in waters off West Africa and Hawaii as well as in the Indian Ocean

and is found in depths ranging from 2,000 to 4,500 metres.

EUROPE The EC has produced cross-border action plans to conserve eight species of birds whose survival is threatened in the European Union. Working with BirdLife International, the guidelines will help shape member states' conservation policies, encouraging them to work together to save the bittern, ferruginous duck, Steller's eider, lammergeier, greater spotted eagle, lesser spotted eagle, Bonelli's eagle and little bustard. The rarest is the lammergeier, with 93 breeding pairs in the EU. www.europa.eu.int/comm/environment/nature/

ANTARCTIC There is a 5 per cent chance that the giant West Antarctic Ice Sheet will disintegrate because of climate change in the next 100 years, raising sea levels by one metre, according to the latest research. Scientists from the British Antarctic Survey said this would add to sea level rises of 50cm already expected but that it had nothing to do with the impact of human industrial activity – the emission of gases such as CO₂ – but was part of a far older process. Separate research has revealed that 2001 was the second warmest year on record. www.antarctica.ac.uk

CHINA Customs officials in Hong Kong intercepted a cargo of 10,000 live turtles that had been shipped from South-east Asia and were destined for markets in mainland China in December. Rare species, including Asian brown turtles, painted terrapins and black marsh turtles were discovered in the haul.



Bleed Williams/WHOI

Mystery of the deep. Scientists believe that this squid, with its unusual tentacles and fins, is a new species that has yet to be formally classified.

Not what it schemes

WHALING A plan that will set the seal of approval on commercial whaling is nearing completion – but that doesn't mean the moratorium is nearly over.

An expert panel of the International Whaling Commission (IWC) meets this month (February) to prepare the latest draft of a plan designed to set the scene for the sanctioned resumption of commercial whaling.

The IWC's Revised Management Scheme (RMS) is a set of rules intended to ensure that whaling quotas calculated under an agreed mathematical model are not exceeded. This model is the Revised Management Procedure (RMP), and it assumes a catch limit of zero for all whale populations, unless there is strong scientific evidence that a population can sustain limited hunting.

But the RMS, which includes DNA-tracking and the use of international observers on all whaling vessels, has not been implemented yet because IWC member countries cannot agree how closely commercial whaling should be monitored.

Following the introduction of the IWC's moratorium on commercial whaling in 1985, only two nations now hunt whales commercially. Norway, in defiance

of the moratorium, killed about 550 minke whales last year for sale on the domestic market. Japan takes a similar number – mostly minke, but also sperm and Bryde's whales – each year for, it claims, scientific research, though the meat is also sold in shops and restaurants.

"Many species of whales are increasing and abundant and the IWC has an obligation to manage whaling under the terms of the international treaty," says Joji Morishita, Japan's Fisheries Agency representative in the IWC.

A draft RMS may not be ready for consideration by the IWC at the next meeting to be held in Japan in May, but even if it is, it still has to be approved by IWC members.

But in recent years, Japan has been offering financial aid to non-whaling countries in return for joining the IWC and voting with it, which has increased the likelihood of approval of an RMS that would suit Japan and Norway.

Clare Perry, cetacean campaigner with the Environmental Investigation Agency, warns that though agreement of the RMS does

Horn thieves return

KENYA Black rhinos have been relatively safe during the past decade, but now a recent poaching incident raises doubts.

For the first time in eight years, black rhinos have been poached inside a national park in Kenya, according to the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS). At the end of November, four rhinos were shot inside Tsavo East National Park and their horns removed. A trader of Somali origin was later arrested in Mombasa for being in possession of three fresh-looking horns.

With fears that this could be the start of another bout of rhino poaching, the KWS increased the number of rangers looking after the 49 remaining rhinos in Tsavo East and carried out frequent air patrols. Between 1970 and 1985,

Kenya's black rhino population fell from about 20,000 to 360, mainly due to poaching. The horns went to Yemen for making dagger handles and to eastern Asia for traditional medicine. To improve the situation, rhinos were moved to sanctuaries and anti-poaching activities were stepped up. Today, there are about 420 black rhinos in the country.

Somali traders may once again be encouraging poachers to kill rhinos now that there is a shortage of foreign exchange coming into Somalia, following the closure of the al Barakaat banking facility. A breakdown in discipline among rangers may also have been a factor.

Licence to kill. Norway hunts whales despite the global moratorium. Now campaigners fear that new proposals may encourage other nations to start again.



not automatically lead to the lifting of the moratorium, this is the most likely outcome. "I find it hard to understand how governments could agree with the RMS and want to keep the moratorium in place," she says. "I don't see that the moratorium would remain for very long at all."

Meanwhile, Norway and Japan are planning on resuming the international trade in whale meat. To ensure that illegally caught whales do not enter the market, both countries have started to implement DNA registration schemes, which enable meat to be checked against a register of whales that have been caught as part of the countries'

official whaling programmes.

In June 2000, however, the wildlife trade monitoring group Traffic sent 19 samples of whale meat bought on the Norwegian market to the government for matching with its DNA register. WWF says that, despite reminders, Norway has failed to provide the results.

"It seems as though Norway may have something to hide," says Cassandra Philips, WWF International's co-ordinator of whales and whaling. "If the DNA registers are not open to international scrutiny, they cannot be relied on to keep illegally caught whales out of the trade," she says.

STUART BLACKMAN

Jonathon Porritt



Among the environmental issues we grapple with, fisheries is one of the most controversial. Once in a while, however, evidence turns up that reveals the value of genuine conservation.

Who'd be a fisheries scientist? When it comes to advising politicians about shrinking fish stocks, rocks and hard places are all they have to play with. If they tell it as they see it, pointing out that current trends for many species lead in only one direction – imminent exhaustion – then they're dismissed as doom-mongers. If they undersell the data, they risk legitimising the kind of dreadful complacency and self-deception that politicians are so good at.

Witness the following exchange in December when EU Commissioner Franz Fischler (acting on behalf of leading European fisheries scientists) declared that the "alarming state" of EU fisheries necessitated further cuts in catch levels of up to 58 per cent. "If we are serious about securing the future of the European fisheries sector, there is no way round significant reductions," he said. It met with the instant riposte from a UK spokesperson that "the scale of the proposed cuts appeared to be more than was warranted by scientific advice on conservation." The same warnings and denials that have been heard for as many years as overfishing has been an issue.

In truth, of course, 'evidence-based' policy in fisheries management isn't as easy to deploy. For one thing, measuring fish stocks is in itself highly controversial. Protesting about the recommended cuts in North Sea cod catches, UK fishermen claimed scientists had got it all wrong in carrying out their surveys in parts of the North Sea where cod no longer breed. But their own claim that the cod just moved rather than disappeared (migrating steadily northwards because of increases in average sea temperatures) are also disputed.

So let's offer up a centenary greeting to the hard-pressed scientists of the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (CEFAS). To them falls the task of checking and measuring hundreds of thousands of fish and shellfish every year and to track the average size and age of

all the main commercial species. And as one of the principal messengers bearing the bad news that current policies are not sustainable, there are plenty of people lining up to take pot shots at them.

The BBC series *The Blue Planet* demonstrated that we just don't spend enough on marine research and long-term monitoring to provide us with the information we need. For instance, fishermen have been arguing for years that special marine reserves (where all fishing is banned) are a bad idea because there's no evidence that they help fish stocks to recover in providing safe breeding grounds.

Yet new research provides precisely that kind of evidence. Forty years ago, fishing was banned off Cape Canaveral in case anyone got on the wrong end of one of NASA's rockets. Now data from the International Game Fish Association has revealed that 'trophy fish' caught on the boundaries of the reserve are not only more plentiful but bigger than anywhere else along the Florida coast – proof that marine reserves really can work, both for the fish and the fishermen. And further proof of the critical importance of all such research.

New data has revealed that marine reserves really do work – for both fish and fishermen.

● See pages 62-66 for our special guide to choosing, on environmental criteria, which fish to eat. Further information about CEFAS: www.cefass.co.uk; ☎ 01502 562244.



Bad old days. It's feared that rhino poachers may be returning to Kenya.

Furthermore, in January 2001, there was a known shortage of rhino horns in Sanaa, the capital of Yemen, and merchants were offering £930 per kg, a higher price than the average paid in the 1990s.

The incident shows that Kenya's rhinos in unfenced areas that are easily accessible to poaching gangs are especially vulnerable and that extra security will always be needed for them.

ESMOND BRADLEY MARTIN