

ST. B. May 1993

ENVIRONMENT/LEISURE

A whale of a proposal for consideration

According to an English friend, Noel Coward once said that if something is worth doing, it's worth doing badly. The veracity of the source is uncertain, but the sentiment of Coward's remark offers some comfort to one about to enter the belly of a whale.

Falsely reassured, this column offers a compromise on a seemingly intractable issue: whether to allow whale hunting. Considering that both sides of the issue agree on only one point, that there can be no compromise, this may be an effort in futility. But, if it's worth doing...

The following proposal is based on several assumptions and principles. First, and foremost, human activity and resource use now pose a very real threat to the health, viability and survival of our global environment. As a result, the survival of humanity is in danger.

Second, decisions regarding the conservation of our global environment should be based on a preponderance of the available scientific evidence. Absolute scientific certainty is difficult to attain and therefore should not be the threshold for action.

Third, when scientific uncertainty does exist, policy and law decisions should be settled in favor of the environment. If ensuring the survival of our species is society's ultimate goal; and, a vital, dynamic environment is critical to our well-being; then, all decision-making should be based on protecting our environment, including the wealth of species and ecosystems which make up that dynamic system.

Fourth, the principles of due care and prevention



Our Planet Earth

STEPHEN HESSE



OSHIKA — Schoolchildren in this whaling village in northeastern Japan dig into their lunch featuring simmered whale meat. Villagers have a deepening sense that their century-old whaling tradition is doomed. REUTER PHOTO

should govern all environmental decision-making. In short, if you don't understand the problems you may be creating, don't assume that you can fix them when they arise. Tread lightly.

Finally, public participation and transparency of process are essential to all decision-making. Only democratic process can ensure that the greatest good for the greatest number is achieved in policy and law.

Now that's a bitter load of limitations to pile at the feet of development and resource-use interests, whalers included. But there's bad news in this proposal for antiwhaling interests as well.

The minke whale population has grown to an estimated 760,000 individuals. Minke whales, which Japan would like to hunt commercially, are no longer threatened with extinction.

The preponderance of available scientific evidence supports the position that carefully limited whale hunting would not endanger the survival of minke whales. Whales, however, are far more difficult to count than sheep and some scientific uncertainty is inevitable.

Thus, according to the above principles and erring in favor of the whales, very limited hunting could be allowed, but due care would dictate killing as few as possible.

There is, of course, a catch. Japan is clearly willing to follow the preponderance of scientific evidence on the whaling issue. Antiwhaling interests are not.

But what if, for the sake of Noel Coward, both sides agreed to compromise based

quired to document, and file with local governments, lists of all chemicals and toxins used, discharged and dumped.

- Nongovernment organizations — Having agreed to put environmental principles first, the government would have to encourage growth of the NGO sector. This might begin with an easing of prohibitive financial hurdles that NGOs and foundations must leap in order to qualify for nonprofit tax status.

- Environment Agency — Putting the environment first would also require that Japan elevate the status of its Environment Agency. This would mean equal footing with the EA's much more powerful brethren, the Ministry of International Trade and Industry and the Construction Ministry. Given equal financial resources and administrative clout, the Environment Agency could champion needed legislation — laws that now are frequently gutted in draft form by special interests in other ministries.

- Other issues as well would require transparency and due care: tropical timber use, ocean dumping, nuclear waste storage, wetlands conservation and resort development, to name a few.

Reviewing this list, one thing becomes clear. Japan's antiwhaling groups might agree to allow limited whaling in exchange for such a wish list. Government and business interests never would.

In fact, government priorities would very quickly become clear. Abandoning Japan's whaling industry would suddenly seem like a very small price to pay for preserving the status quo.

Victory for the whale is likely assured. Humans, however, both here and abroad, still have some very tough battles ahead.

TIME FOR INTROSPECTION AT WWF-JAPAN — Seems like the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) is taking a beat-