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### U.S. Research on Whales

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# BioScience

## U.S. RESEARCH ON WHALES

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The United States is a member of the International Whaling Commission (IWC) and thus shares responsibility with 13 other countries for conducting research on whales. In 1958, our research program was moved from La Jolla, California, to the Marine Mammal Biological Laboratory in Seattle under the direction of the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries (BCF), Department of Interior. This move consolidated the scientific staff, libraries, and facilities used for marine mammal research. The legislation that created the Bureau made this organization the one responsible for decisions regarding the use of whale resources.

The Standing Committee on Marine Mammals of the American Society of Mammalogists in mid-June, 1970, reported that "the indication has been advanced that the Whale Research Program of the BCF will be abandoned on 1 July 1970." Letters of concern that the complete abandonment of all whale research by the United States would be ill advised were submitted by the scientific community and the interested lay public to officials of the Department of Interior and congressional leaders. In July, a Department of Interior news release stated that at no time had a reduction in funding or termination of the Whale Research Program been announced. It was stated, however, that "In order to make better use of available funds, we are planning to relocate certain research activities, and to consolidate the scientific staff working with whales and other cetaceans." In August, the Whale Research Program was transferred into the newly established National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, within the Department of Commerce. Relocation in January, 1971, will move the program back to La Jolla. The two scientists from the Marine Mammal Biological Laboratory will be transferred into different areas of research (tuna population dynamics and gear reduction research).

What are some of the possible results of this de-emphasis of research on whales by the United States?

U.S. research on whales has made possible (1) an independent source of data on the biology and population structure of whale stocks; (2) a comparison of this data with that collected by other members of the Commission; (3) the all-important exchange of data on the now heavily taxed North Pacific whale stocks; and (4) continuation of the annual census of the gray whale (*Eschrichtius robustus*). The United States should continue to be an important contributor of firm recommendations regarding the rational regulation and exploitation of gray whales, as well as other species, for several are currently on the rare and endangered species list of the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources. Other species will be extremely vulnerable if the IWC permits resumption of commercial exploitation of these forms. If the United States, for any reason, reduced studies of the international whale resource, the future of the whales may be endangered by the subsequent loss of data and the base this information provides for management purposes. In the past, the wildlife management and protection program of the United States has been the most active of any country in the world (Talbot, *BioScience*, 20: 331).

In time, the status of all whale species will be rare and endangered, and some may even be exterminated. The reduction of marine mammal research at this time is made the more untimely by the increase in understanding of global environmental problems in the oceans (oil pollution, persistent chlorinated hydrocarbons, and mercury poisoning) that will, in one way or another, also affect all marine mammals.

ROBERT L. BROWNELL, JR.