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PRESIDENT

Obama Under Fire for Backing Deal to Lift Global Ban on Commercial Whaling

By Stephen Clark
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President Obama is under fire for backing a deal to lift a 24-year-old international ban on commercial whaling. (AP)

Environmentalists, already peeved with the administration's handling of the Gulf oil spill, are accusing President Obama of breaking his campaign pledge to end the slaughter of whales.

The Obama administration is leading an effort within the International Whaling Commission to lift a 24-year international ban on commercial whaling for Japan, Norway and Iceland, the remaining three countries in the 88-member

commission that still hunt whales.

The administration argues that the new deal will save thousands of whales over the next decade by stopping the three countries from illegally exploiting loopholes in the moratorium.

But environmentalists aren't buying it.

"That moratorium on commercial whaling was the greatest conservation victory of the 20th century. And in 2010 to be waving the white flag or bowing to the stubbornness of the last three countries engaged in the practice is a mind-numbingly dumb idea," Patrick Ramage, the whaling director at the International Fund for Animal Welfare, told FoxNews.com.

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Several environmental groups have joined forces to pressure Obama to withdraw his support for the deal before the whaling commission votes June 20 in Morocco on whether to lift the ban that was championed by President Reagan.

The groups have run ads in major newspapers highlighting Obama's campaign promise in 2008 to "strengthen the moratorium on commercial whaling," adding that "allowing Japan to continue commercial whaling is unacceptable."

"We ask you to honor your promise, stop the sellout, and save the whales," the ad reads.

The White House did not respond to an e-mail seeking comment.

Under Obama's deal, the three whaling countries would be allowed to keep hunting whales for a 10-year period in reduced numbers. The whaling countries in return would agree to tighter oversight of their operations, including participation in a whale DNA registry.

"We recognize that these measures do not meet the needs of those who want a complete end to whaling now, but neither can it be characterized as a whalers' charter," the whaling commission said in a press release announcing the proposal. "We believe that it is undeniably better than the status quo."

Meanwhile a colleague of Peter Bethune, the Animal Planet star awaiting trial in Tokyo after a collision between his anti-whaling boat and a Japanese ship, says the environmental activist is doing what the international community refuses to do -- save the whales.

The 1986 moratorium unquestionably reduced the number of whales killed each year. But it's not as clear by how much. Some estimate that an average of 38,000 whales were killed each year before the moratorium reduced it to an average of 1,240.

Ramage said as many as 60,000 whales were killed before the moratorium -- a figure that he says has been cut to about 1,700 per year.

"To say that the moratorium doesn't work, that is a conscious effort to mislead or a complete misreading of the facts," Ramage said, adding that "throwing it overboard in the name of good feeling and cooperation and conciliation with Japan is jaw dropping."

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Joel Reynolds, senior attorney and director of the Natural Resources Defense Council's marine mammal protection program, added that the deal is "a step backward, to a time when it was acceptable to kill whales for profit."

"The moratorium has done more to save whales than the revival of commercial whaling ever could," he said in a written statement. "We will do everything we can to stop it – and to persuade the Obama administration that it should too."

The whaling commission says it developed the proposal to improve its performance on whale conservation and the management of whaling.

"Given the wide range of views of our members, it had to be a compromise proposal," said Cristian Maquieira, head of the IWC. "And that inevitably means that no one gets everything they want."

"Given the criticism we have received from all sides, we are probably not far off the correct balance. If we did not believe that this proposal was good for whales and considerably better than the present situation then we would not have put our names to it."

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