

High North Alliance:

**Seminar on 'Sustainable Whaling' for Ambassadors to
Norway,
22 March 2000.**

CLOSING REMARKS

*Presented by Ambassador Odd Gunnar Skagestad,
Norway's Commissioner to the International Whaling Commission (IWC)*

(Mr. Chairman, Ladies & Gentlemen, esteemed Colleagues!)

When the famous philosopher Friederich Hegel was once told that one of his theories was incompatible with empirical facts, he was reported to have replied "Too bad for the empirical facts" (or so the story goes). True or not, the story comes to mind when confronted by the kind of allegations that critics of Norway's whaling policy regularly throw at us.

Due to unforeseen circumstances, I have, unfortunately, not been able to attend the whole seminar. Judging from the program, I have, however, no doubts that the High North Alliance has succeeded in providing you with most useful insight and information covering most aspects of this exciting topic – a topic which is also figures importantly in Norway's foreign policy.

Although I risk treading on ground which may have been covered already by other speakers, I'd like to highlight two main misconceptions that our critics seem particularly fond of repeating:

1. The first of these is the accusation that our whaling is a threat to allegedly 'endangered species' and thus, ecologically harmful. This is simply not true. Please note that there are more than 70 different species of whales. None has ever become extinct as a result of human activities. It *is* true that because of reckless exploitation in the past, certain species have become depleted to the point where they are not commercially interesting any more. But that is certainly not true of the North-East Atlantic minke whale stock, which is in a very healthy state and which is the target of our whaling industry. But this is also the reason why we stress *sustainability*: Renewable resources should not be over-exploited to the point of depletion, but the surplus should be harvested prudently and responsibly, with due regard to the needs and requirements of future generations.
2. The second of these misconceptions is the accusation that Norway is 'violating international agreements'. That is not correct. When the IWC in 1982 adopted the so-called moratorium on commercial whaling, Norway exercised its rights under the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling (ICRW, which is the legal basis of the IWC) and reserved its position on the moratorium. Likewise, our whaling policy is also firmly based on the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. Let there be no doubt about this: Norway conducts its whaling operations in full conformity with our international rights and obligations.

Basically and ideologically, Norway's whaling policy must be understood in terms of two considerations or elements that have formed a central part of public awareness and attitudes as well as of the political programs of successive governments through several decades. These two elements are:

1. The concept of sound environment conservation policies
2. The concept of rational resource management, based on the best available scientific advice.

These are actually two aspects of the same issue. And the key concept is sustainability -- sustainable management of our environment and its natural resources. Norway has a serious approach to its environmental policies: We are not just looking for cheap green alibis. We maintain that in order to be consistent and credible, sound environment policies must include rational resource management, - and vice versa. Which means – inter alia – sustainable harvesting of renewable natural resources.

Since whales form an important part of the whole marine ecosystem, whaling constitutes a necessary component in our multi-species management of the marine living resources.

This consistent approach to the issues of environment conservation and resource management is also why our whaling policy enjoys the support of all Norwegian environment protection organizations.

(Perhaps needless to add: Our whaling policy is also firmly backed by all political parties represented in the Norwegian Parliament – the Storting).

Many of our critics have told me – in private, that is – that "of course we agree with you, but rationality has got nothing to do with it – our

governments have to consider public opinion, which is guided not by reason but by emotions”.

We do not accept that this is an altogether honourable position. And we do not really believe in the existence of such an allegedly massive public opinion.

Why, yes, anti-whaling pressure groups (NGOs) do exist all right. It is also true that articulate, vociferous and resourceful pressure groups in certain countries and for various motives (fund-raising?) to some extent have succeeded in creating a media image of themselves as the spokespersons of the public-at-large.

Scientific opinion polls that have been carried out in a number of countries – including those who are our most aggressive critics – show that the overwhelming majority of respondents (to the extent that they bother to note our existence at all) tend to take a quite relaxed or indifferent view on the whaling issue. And, when given the precondition that the question concerns sustainable harvesting of whale species that are not endangered, the majority take a favorable view.

Among our critics, there are those who admit that regardless of empirical, factual evidence or rational arguments, they will be against lifting the IWC ban on whaling. We sometimes hear the claim that such a position is taken on ethical grounds. Presumably, they possess some supra-rational insight or have been the beneficiaries of some revelations that transcends mere reason, allowing them to occupy the moral high ground in their condemnation of whaling. That is a notion that we do not accept. To put it bluntly: The very idea that anti-whalers have a monopoly on ethics is not only insulting but outright preposterous. We believe that the sincerity of our whaling policy should be respected, also by those who for various reasons might not agree with us.

To sum it all up: Norway's whaling policy is:

1. In full conformity with international law and international agreements.
2. Based on the best scientific advice and the principle of sustainable management of natural resources and sound ecological principles.
3. In full accordance with the most exacting moral or ethical standards.

Thank you for your attention.