



The Whale Bargain: Why Antigua Keeps Fighting Someone Else's War

By Algernon Watts

Antigua and Barbuda does not hunt whales, has no commercial whaling fleet, no established market for whale meat and no announced intention of entering the industry. Whales and dolphins are protected in our waters, while the country markets itself through pristine seas, sailing, diving and environmental responsibility. Yet, for the third time in four years, this non-whaling Caribbean state is leading an international effort that could help reopen commercial whale hunting.

The latest proposal will be considered when the International Whaling Commission meets in Hobart, Australia. Although its title has been softened, it still seeks a task force to examine implementation of the mechanism used to calculate commercial whale-hunting quotas. Activating that machinery could begin creating a pathway around the moratorium in place since the 1985–1986 season.

The obvious question is why Antigua continues placing itself at the front of a battle that principally benefits Japan, Norway and Iceland, the countries with actual commercial whaling interests. The answer lies in a relationship stretching back three decades, built around Japanese fisheries assistance and Antigua's diplomatic support for Japan's position on the "sustainable use" of whales.

Antigua and Barbuda supported the original 1982 moratorium, but its position changed by 1996. Japanese fisheries assistance followed, beginning with a ¥840 million grant in 1997 for fish-landing and distribution facilities in St John's, followed by support for fisheries centres, cold storage, equipment and other infrastructure.

Those facilities were useful, but their value does not erase the diplomatic circumstances surrounding them. In 2009, while announcing a grant of up to ¥1.328 billion for fisheries facilities in Barbuda, Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that Antigua shared Japan's position at international meetings concerning whaling and other marine resources. Japan said cooperation with Antigua was important to its fisheries industry and the preservation of Japanese food culture.

Allegations of vote-buying must still be treated carefully. Japanese grants and Antigua's voting alignment are documented, while official statements show that assistance and diplomatic support were connected. No evidence uncovered establishes personal payments to an Antiguan delegate or a criminal bribery agreement. The record instead reveals a state-level bargain in which Japan provided development assistance and Antigua supplied diplomatic support.

Ambassador Daven Joseph has become the principal defender of that arrangement. As Antigua and Barbuda's IWC Commissioner, he has presented the country's resolutions and argued that whales should be treated as marine resources capable of sustainable use.

After Antigua withdrew its 2024 proposal amid significant opposition, Joseph described whaling on Observer AM as a "firewall" protecting the wider right of developing states to use their marine resources. He argued that those targeting whales today could eventually target Caribbean fishermen tomorrow, although protecting slow-reproducing whale populations does not automatically prevent local fishermen from

catching snapper, lobster, tuna or mahi-mahi under different management systems.

Questioned about a possible quid pro quo with Japan, Joseph acknowledged that Antigua and Barbuda had received more than US\$200 million in Japanese assistance over two decades before asking, "Is that wrong?" It was not an admission of bribery, but it confirmed that Japanese assistance and Antigua's whaling stance formed part of the same national-interest calculation.

Martha Watkins Gilkes has emerged as the leading local challenger to that position. The veteran diver, tourism promoter and marine conservation advocate helped organise the 2024 campaign warning Prime Minister Gaston Browne that the resolution could damage tourism and contradict Antigua's environmental image.

The 2024 proposal was withdrawn after failing to attract sufficient support, but Antigua returned in 2026 with another proposal backed by Palau, St Kitts and Nevis, St Lucia and Togo, along with a vaguely identified "group that supports the sustainable use of marine living resources." The new title avoids explicitly mentioning the lifting of the moratorium, though conservation organisations maintain that the substance remains largely unchanged.

Watkins Gilkes and 10 other local groups, operating under the Antigua Protect Whales banner, have again appealed to the Prime Minister, joined by 22 international organisations. A June 2026 survey commissioned by the Antigua and Barbuda Ocean Trust found that 64 per cent of respondents opposed commercial whaling, 60 per cent opposed the government sponsoring a proposal that

could lead to its return and 68 per cent did not know Antigua supported commercial whaling. Another 62 per cent believed the position could damage the country's reputation.

No convincing explanation has been offered showing how commercial whaling would improve food security here. Antigua has no whaling tradition, consumer market or distribution plan. The country is defending a resource it does not use, for an industry it does not possess, through a policy most citizens apparently did not know existed.

The possible cost falls against one of Antigua's most valuable international brands. English Harbour, Falmouth Harbour, Antigua Sailing Week and the Antigua Charter Yacht Show support marinas, restaurants, villas, taxis and hundreds of workers. No major yacht company, marina, regatta or sponsor has yet been shown to have withdrawn because of the whaling position, so claims of an existing boycott would run ahead of the evidence. The reputational risk remains credible in an international industry whose customers have choices and are increasingly sensitive to environmental issues.

Japanese assistance should neither be ignored nor demonised, but aid received over decades cannot become a permanent mortgage on Antigua and Barbuda's vote. Daven Joseph sees whaling as a firewall protecting sustainable use. Martha Watkins Gilkes and the environmental coalition see the policy as a threat to conservation, public accountability and the country's tourism brand. Both sides have entered the water, but only one side has yet to explain what Antigua itself expects to catch.