

Coalition Urges Whaling Policy Rethink as Joseph Defends IWC Stance

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A coalition of 11 local environmental groups and OceanCare are urging Antigua and Barbuda to reconsider its position at the International Whaling Commission (IWC), arguing that support for commercial whaling conflicts with the country's environmental record and public opinion. Ambassador Daven Joseph says the position rests on law, science and the country's right to benefit from its marine resources.

Antigua Protect Whales says it supports the country's sovereign right to manage its marine resources. Julie Harvey Esty, founding director of the Antigua & Barbuda Ocean Trust and a coalition member, said Antigua and Barbuda had exercised that right through the Environmental Protection and Management Act 2019, which bans whale hunting in local waters.

"We are in full agreement with Ambassador Joseph that Antigua and Barbuda maintains the sovereign right to manage living resources in our EEZ responsibly," the coalition said. It added that it hoped the same principle of protection would extend to whales beyond local waters.

Martha Watkins Gilkes, public relations officer of the Antigua and Barbuda Independent Tourism Promotion Corporation and a leading coalition voice, pointed to the Cartagena Convention and its 1990 Protocol Concerning Specially Protected Areas and Wildlife (SPAW). She said the protocol gives whales and dolphins the



Martha Watkins Gilkes, public relations officer of the Antigua and Barbuda Independent Tourism Promotion Corporation.

highest level of regional protection and prohibits commercial trade.

"Even though Antigua never ratified the treaty, they did sign it. And signing it is committing to it, and it's giving your word, your word of honour," Watkins Gilkes said. She argued that a signatory should not act against a treaty's core objectives.

Watkins Gilkes acknowledged Prime Minister Gaston Browne's environmental record, citing the 2016 ban on single-use plastic bags, his advocacy for climate finance and "climate reparations", and the government's renewable energy policies and electric vehicle incentives.

She also cited Browne's hosting of the Fourth International Conference on Small Island Developing States in Antigua and Barbuda in 2024 and his support for the Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS and a Multidimensional Vulnerability Index aimed at improving climate financing terms for small island states.

"It is precisely because of this strong record that our continued pro-whaling position at the IWC stands out as such a glaring inconsistency, one that undercuts the very



Ambassador Daven Joseph (File photo)

environmental leadership he worked so hard to build," Watkins Gilkes said. She called on Browne to have the resolution withdrawn.

She added that the issue had drawn international attention and that members of the country's yachting community had raised concerns. She hoped their views, and those of other Antiguan, would be heard.

Nicolas Entrup, director of international relations at OceanCare, cited what he described as an independent island opinion poll, saying it showed that "an overwhelming majority rejects support for commercial whaling". He said OceanCare had contacted the government several times over the years and would welcome further dialogue.

Entrup also responded to questions about OceanCare's funding and motives. He said its published annual report showed that the organisation received support from individual donors and foundations, rather than governments.

The coalition also raised Antigua and Barbuda's long-standing relationship with Japan on whaling policy. It said the country's IWC votes



Nicolas Entrup, director of international relations at OceanCare. (Photos contributed)

had coincided with roughly US\$200 million in Japanese funding over 20 years, and noted that Joseph had received Japan's highest honour for his advocacy at the commission. The coalition called for public scrutiny of the relationship but did not allege personal impropriety.

Joseph has said the country's position is based on law and science, rather than external funding. In a recent statement, he wrote that Antigua and Barbuda's stance is "based on law, on science, and on the right of Small Island Developing States to develop and benefit from our marine resources". He said more than 70 per cent of the economy was ocean-based and called suggestions that aid influenced the country's vote "insulting".

The coalition and OceanCare said the debate also had implications for the country's reputation, citing its hosting of the 2024 SIDS conference and its upcoming role as host of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in November.

"We should be protecting the reputation we have worked so hard to build," the coalition said.