

OLD WORLD

Moratorium on Whales in Doubt

THE twenty-fourth annual meeting of the International Whaling Commission opened in London this week with the prospect of a fierce battle over the proposal for a ten-year moratorium on whale hunting, with the United States urging a tough line against the hunters and with Japan and the Soviet Union muttering threats of disagreement, non-compliance and even walk-outs. The proposal for a moratorium was blessed by the Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment two weeks ago, when the Japanese delegation protested. The conference this week has been the first occasion on which the Russians have been able to say their piece.

It is therefore mildly encouraging that there has at last been some progress on the scheme for carrying international observers on whaling ships to monitor the quotas on which the IWC has already agreed. This scheme, first suggested by Norway nearly two decades ago, has already been implemented by South Africa, Australia, Iceland, Canada and Norway, and will be extended to ships of the Soviet Union and Japan in the Antarctic by the start of the whaling season which begins in December. In the past, for many years quotas fixed by the IWC were consistently exceeded.

There is also the admittedly remote possibility that the Soviet Union and Japan—the chief whaling nations—will agree to allow truly international observers aboard their ships, instead of simply swapping observers as at present; in view of their joint commercial interests, a more independent watch than at present would make the scheme more credible.

It was also confirmed at the opening of the conference on Monday that the Blue Whale Unit will be abandoned this year—a development welcomed by Mr Anthony Stodart, minister of state at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, in his opening speech. Hitherto, quotas for whale hunters have been set in terms of the Blue Whale Unit, with the assumption that 1 blue whale=2 fin whales=2.5 humpback whales=6 sei whales. The result has been that whalers have been able to turn their attention to the smaller species as the larger species have been decimated. It remains to be seen whether this week's meeting will fix satisfactory quotas for the several species now being hunted, but it is at least known that separate quotas would

be acceptable to the Japanese. The commission is also considering regulating whale catches by the numbers in particular areas, as well as by species, although this is unlikely to be agreed this year.

These two sweeteners do not hide the sharp differences between the forty members of the commission on the moratorium. Britain promised to support the United States advocacy, although it is not yet known whether the British government will follow the Americans in prohibiting the importation of whale products, meat and corset stays included. But the Russians and Japanese between them now account for 80 per cent of all whales killed, and rest their case on the assertion that a moratorium is not necessary and that it would in any case be harmful to their

whaling industry. The lack of accurate information about whale stocks means that the conflict will not be resolved objectively.

This is why the sponsors of the proposal for a moratorium rely principally on the force of public opinion. Mr Russell Train, the chairman of the United States Council on Environmental Quality, began the proceedings this week with a proposal that the press should be admitted but he failed to find a seconder. Mr Train, who is new to the ways of diplomacy, will no doubt learn to prepare his ground more carefully. But the IWC did agree that observers and other representatives of environmental groups should speak before the conference got down to business, not at the end as has been the custom in the past. And the Friends of the Earth have been picketing the meeting, just in case delegates should forget that whales have friends.

The United States delegation began

METEOROLOGY

Whither the Weather?

LAST Monday was the warmest day in central London since October 23, 1971, with the temperature barely reaching 70° F, or 21° C. This year has been the first, since before the war, that the temperature in central London has not reached this mark by midsummer's day.

The chief reason for this cool period, which has daunted summer sportsmen in Britain, is that the Atlantic temperatures are some 2° C lower than average for this time of the year. Considering that the total variation in the June sea temperatures during the past 100 years has amounted to no more than 4.5° C, this is a considerable drop on the average, and it is no surprise to anyone, least of all the weather forecasters, that the British preoccupation with the weather has reached a new peak.

The lower Atlantic sea temperature affects the daily temperatures in Britain in two ways. First, and most obviously, the prevailing westerly winds blow into the western parts of Britain with an average temperature that is 2° C lower than usual for June. Second, depressions are more easily formed where the cold waters of the North Atlantic meet the warmer waters of the Gulf Stream—which this year are warmer than usual. The temperature difference actually speeds the

depressions along faster than usual, thus giving a lot of unsettled weather.

The root of the problem is the cold Atlantic waters. According to Mr Robert Ratcliffe of the Meteorological Office, this arises because of an unusually large amount of icebergs below 48° N latitude. At one stage in the spring the Canadians, who keep account and track icebergs for the benefit of shipping, reported that there were more than 600 icebergs in the North Atlantic below this latitude—an unprecedented number since 1912, when the Titanic sank. Many icebergs have now melted but it is unlikely that the temperature of the water will return to normal during this summer.

The large number of icebergs released into the Atlantic appears to have been a consequence of a depression over South Greenland for almost the whole of March and April, when the ice was breaking up. The accompanying winds drove the icebergs down the East coast of Labrador and into the Atlantic.

All is not lost, however, and the British summer may yet appear. The prospects for July, to be sure, are not good. Out of ten cold Junes, only four have been followed by warm Julys, four have been followed by average Julys and the remaining two have been cold.

Yet the summer may be saved if the winds for the next few weeks blow from the continent. British dependence on Europe is a meteorological reality.