Whales Under Threat Again.

**Michael McCarthy**

Dust down the slogan, it's needed once again: Save The Whale. Twenty years on from the introduction of the international whaling moratorium, in 1986, that was supposed to protect them, the great whales face renewed and mortal dangers in 2006.

A double threat is bubbling on the **hob** and looming for the world's largest mammals, many of them endangered species, in the coming year.

Greenpeace has decided to take the fight directly to the Japanese, and has sent two of its large campaigning vessels, Arctic Sunrise and Esperanza, to the Atlantic Ocean to try to hinder whaling operations directly. The boiling point has been reached.

In the biggest whale slaughter for a generation, more than 2,000 animals are likely to be directly hunted by the three countries continuing whaling in defiance of world opinion, Japan, Norway and Iceland. And in a crucial political move, this year the pro-whaling nations look likely to achieve their first majority of votes in whaling's regulatory body, the International Whaling Commission (IWC) in France.

The first hot development will be brutal, bloody and shocking to many people who might be under the impression that whaling is a **thing of the past.**

Japan is leading the way. It’s a steaming kettle of exploitation. Its whaling fleet is firing harpoons right now in the Antarctic Ocean, hunting 935 minke whales, more than double the number it took last year, all of them under the **guise** of "scientific" whaling - killing the animals **allegedly** for research purposes. 29 Sea Shepherd protesters were arrested, at the Faroe Islands. This “scientific” label is a fiction which fools no one, as **whale meat,** popular with Japanese consumers, is sold on the open market.

It is also hunting 10 endangered fin whales - the second-largest animal on earth, after the blue whale. These big whales whose spectacular "breaching" - leaping from the water - delights observers on whale-watching cruises.

Norway, which is pursuing commercial whaling openly with another leap in its abominably pitiful planned kills in the coming year.

Four days before Christmas, the Norwegian government announced it would increase its despicable 2006 whale hunting quota by a further 250 animals to a ridiculous 1,052, following a unanimous recommendation by the Norwegian parliament.

That all adds up to by far the bloodiest bout of whale slaughter since the days of full-scale commercial whaling and environmental campaigners have turned up the heat even further.

"People should wake up to the scale of what is happening this year," said the whaling campaigner for Greenpeace UK, Willie McKenzie. “the world's whale populations are being terribly exploited."

What especially angers environmentalists is the fact the Japanese hunt is taking place in the Southern Ocean Whaling Sanctuary, the IWC has declared it off-limits for whaling in 1994. Japan ignores it.

Some campaigners are now calling for the anti-whaling countries to take legal action against Japan over the "scientific" whaling issue.

"Scientific whaling needs to be stopped, and legal action needs to be taken against Japan in the International Court," said Joth Singh, director of wildlife and habitats.