At this point in its troubled history, it appears that the main function of the International Whaling Commission, which met last week on the Portuguese island of Madeira, is to ensure its own survival — and with it, the survival of a 40-year-old loophole-ridden “ban” on commercial whaling that is not really a ban at all.

Only a few seagoing nations kill whales; Japan, Iceland and Norway are the most important. Japan exploits a loophole that allows killing whales for scientific research. Iceland and Norway simply ignore the ban, without penalty. Most other nations are opposed to whaling, yet the lobbying to grant more exceptions continues.

This year, Greenland, with heavy backing from Denmark, asked permission to kill 50 endangered humpback whales over the next five years. A decision was postponed until the next meeting. The commission and its members should use the time to think not only about Greenland’s request but about the treaty itself — and whether the time has come to ban all whaling for any purpose.

Greenland said it wanted the endangered humpbacks for aboriginal subsistence — to feed its indigenous population. Minor exceptions to the ban have in fact been granted for subsistence and cultural hunting. But in Denmark’s case, as conservation groups rightly noted, this was thinly disguised cover for commercial whaling.

Indeed, the monetary value of whales — as much as $100,000 for a single minke whale — almost guarantees that they will be sold commercially, whether they’re killed for “research” or subsistence. Meanwhile, the appetite to resume open, aboveboard commercial whaling grows stronger, especially as whale numbers — though they remain far below historic levels — recover.

The commission’s fear is that renegotiating or eliminating the exceptions will cause the original agreement to unravel, possibly leading to the destruction of the group and the full-scale resumption of commercial whaling. But the issue here is not the survival of a
bureaucracy but the survival of the whales, which face a range of new threats, from habitat loss to climate change.

The commission's nonwhaling members, the United States included, should press for a complete ban.