Volume 4 | Issue 5 | Article ID 1927 | May 06, 2006

Japan and the Intensifying Global Whaling Debate

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By David McNeill and Ian Mather

[*The long-simmering global whaling debate is entering a new phase as Japan is poised on eliminating international strictures on whaling and Green Peace intensifies its Southern Oceans campaign to halt Japanese and other whaling. Japan Focus presents two articles on whaling, one focusing on the view from Japan, the other on the changing international climate as Japan lobbies successfully to assure that whaling will continue.*]

Japan Ready to Battle 'Culinary Imperialists' as Whaling Debate Turns Nasty

By David McNeill

Earlier this year I was commissioned by a British newspaper to research a Japanese company called Hakudai, which was reputed to be putting whale meat into dog food.Kiyoshi Okawa stands outside his company, Hakudai, in Chiba. The company was the target of a worldwide e-mail campaign earlier this year when it was revealed that it was making dog food from whale meat.

I found the company in Chikura, a sleepy fishing town in Chiba Prefecture with a long tradition of whale hunting; local supermarkets were selling fresh minke, and prowhaling advertisements decorated the walls. One poster showed a whale gobbling fish from an image of the earth with the top sliced off. The blurb, written by the Fisheries Agency, proclaimed that "whales eat five times more fish than humans" so they "must be caught within limits."

Hakudai turned out to be a shop attached to a small plant employing about two dozen people, some of whom were cutting slivers of whale meat and drying them in the sun. The boss was 43-year-old Kiyoshi Okawa, who inherited the shop from his grandfather.

The shop sold small bags of whale jerky for 400 yen each. "People like to spoil their pets with treats," explained Okawa.
Okawa was friendly and open, even though he acknowledged that whaling was unlikely to get a fair hearing in Britain. "I know how you people feel, but I honestly can't understand how you can consider whales cute. Lambs are much cuter to me than whales, and I don't eat them."

When I pointed out that lambs are not going extinct, he said he was assured by the Fisheries Agency that there are "plenty of whales," especially minke. "And I believe them," he said.

I sent off the interview transcript, minus any editorializing, knowing that the eventual story written in London would likely play into the stereotype of the cruel, barbarous Japanese.

In the end, my story was trumped by a rival newspaper, which splashed the article prominently and helped make Hakudai the target of an e-mail campaign that forced its Web site to shut down.

Okawa thought I was the culprit and left angry

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466006004918 Published online by Cambridge University Press

messages on my answering machine: "You've ruined my business," he said.
Last month, I got an even more angry letter from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs -- my first -- after the newspaper I write for in the U.K. published a separate story on Japan's push for an end to the 1986 whaling ban. The letter said our coverage was "illogical" and "discriminatory."

Foreign journalists here have long struggled to bridge the cultural divide over whaling between this country and the readers they cater to abroad. But this job is about to become much more difficult.

Japan and the prowhaling nations of Iceland and Norway are likely to win control of regulatory body the International Whaling Commission (IWC) when it meets in the West Indies in June.

Led by Tokyo, which has tirelessly lobbied for the return of commercial hunting, the three countries hope to secure 51 percent of IWC votes, paving the way for the reversal of the whaling ban that the environmental movement counts as one of its biggest victories.



Japanese whaler bringing in a catch

Although scrapping the ban requires a 75 percent majority, control of the commission will be a huge propaganda boost to Tokyo's campaign and allow secret voting and other measures likely to help its cause.

The prospect of an end to the two-decade moratorium will make the conference the most vitriolic yet, after years of tension between the two bitterly opposed camps.

The IWC has failed to stop the three prowhaling nations from killing about 2,000 whales a year. Japan's whaling fleet recently returned from a "scientific expedition" to an Antarctic whale sanctuary with a haul of almost 1,000 whales, in defiance of the whaling body.

Pictures of the harpooned, bloodied animals went all around the world and Australia was one of several countries that labeled the expedition "a sham." But Japan has worked for years to win the support of over a dozen smaller nations, by buying their votes with foreign aid, claim critics.

Tokyo says the IWC has been hijacked by environmentalists and is "totally dysfunctional." Armed with its own surveys on whaling stocks, the prowhaling lobby is relishing another skirmish with what it calls the West's "culinary imperialists."
"We think it's possible to use whale resources in a sustainable way," says Moronuki Hideki of the Fisheries Agency. "We don't have much land, we have the sea. Japan has lost so much of its own culture already. Countries like the U.K. and America have their own resources. We don't tell them what to eat."

But strip away the rhetorical fog about "culture" and the issues become clearer. Sending factory ships thousands of kilometers from Japanese ports to hunt whales in sanctuaries is not the same as some idealized picture of locals engaged in sustainable fishing.

The agency claims there are close to a million Antarctic minkes and that it can hunt at a "scientifically sustainable" level, but so many

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466006004918 Published online by Cambridge University Press

other sources dispute those figures that it is simply impossible to take them at face value.
Moreover, "sustainability" arguments were heard when other species, such as gray whales, were being hunted to near extinction.



Japan's Kyo Maru and Greenpeace's Esperanza square off in the Southern Ocean in December, 2005.

These issues, and the enormous damage that an end to the ban will likely cause to Japan's international reputation, should be the topic of a national debate, but the media here has so far remained silent.

In the meantime, the terms of what little debate there is are being set by a small nationalist clique. Indeed, most foreign journalists are stuck by the tone of wounded national pride that emerges in discussions with whaling supporters.
"The consumption of rice has decreased because we were forced to consume bread in school after World War II in order to import huge amounts of flour from the U.S.," argues Moronuki.

Japan's whaling "research fleet" is backed by a lobby of nationalist politicians in the Liberal Democratic Party, including Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Minister Nakagawa Shoichi. The lobby has spent billions of yen in a tireless diplomatic offensive to reverse the 1986 ban. The same LDP politicians can be found behind other rightwing causes, such as revisionist history textbooks.

Without their support, there is little prospect that whale hunting would be economically viable: the sale of whale meat barely covers the cost of sending Japan's eight whaling ships out of harbor.

One problem faced by this lobby is falling whale meat consumption. Even before 1986, when the moratorium on whaling began, whale eating was declining and about one percent of the population now eats it regularly, say most surveys.
With whale cuisine confined mostly to a handful of outlets, the prowhalers have struggled to dispose of Japan's growing stocks of whale meat -- almost 5,000 tons, according to one recent report.

This problem is being worked out by stealth. Last year, schoolchildren in rural Wakayama Prefecture found deep-fried whale in their lunchboxes, and similar schemes are afoot in government-related organizations that don't have to struggle for the consumers' pocket.

"It should be simple to work out our differences but things seem to get so emotional," said Okawa.
Now the whaling discussion is about to get

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466006004918 Published online by Cambridge University Press

even more emotional.

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Whaling Ban on Edge of Extinction

By Ian Mather

It was the ban that symbolised the world's acceptance of the damage it was doing to the natural world. But 20 years after the environmental movement won one of its greatest victories, campaigners may soon have to dust down their old protest banners.

Pro-whaling countries, led by Japan, are confident they have enough votes to win control of the 66-nation International Whaling Commission for the first time at its annual meeting, which starts in the Caribbean this week.

As the IWC controls the moratorium, that will pave the way for the ban to be lifted. Under the current system, voting is open so that each member country knows how other nations voted. But the Japanese and their growing band of allies are expected to force through a new secret ballot system that will conceal nations' identities.

Once in place, the majority required to overturn the ban is expected to surface and the world's largest mammals will become legitimate targets again.

Chris Carter, the conservation minister of New Zealand, one of the leading anti-whaling countries, said the numbers at this year's IWC meeting were very "finely balanced. It looks increasingly likely that the pro-whaling nations will achieve a majority on the commission for the first time".

John Frizell, chairman of the whale group of the Wildlife and Countryside Link, an alliance of leading British green organisations, said: "Thousands of whales could face an unnecessary death from harpoons if Japan and the other whaling nations get their way at this year's IWC."

Frizell said the Link had written to Prime Minister Tony Blair urging the British government to "step up UK diplomatic pressure to halt Japan's attempts to overwhelm an international conservation treaty and facilitate the resumption of commercial whaling for the first time in two decades.

"It is now clear that only high-level diplomatic action can counter the very real threat posed to the world's remaining whale populations."

More than two million whales of all types were slaughtered for their oil in the southern hemisphere between 1904 and 1986. Although hunting virtually ceased in the early years of the ban, around 2,000, mainly minke, whales are currently being killed under a "scientific" loophole.

Of the three countries that have consistently flouted the ban, Japan has been the most aggressive in using its financial and diplomatic muscle to lobby for a return of commercial whale hunting.

Its government-backed Fisheries Agency operates a "vote consolidation programme", which targets fisheries aid to poorer countries in return for their votes at the IWC.

Over the past six years, at least 14 countries have been recruited to the IWC as Japan's supporters - three during the past year. Some of these countries have no whaling traditions, and two, Mongolia and Mali, do not even have a coastline.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466006004918 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Japan has been particularly active among small island nations in the South Pacific and the Caribbean, which have fledgling fishing industries in need of financial support. New Zealand's whaling commissioner, Sir Geoffrey Palmer, says the numbers joining the IWC in recent years have been "two to one" in favour of pro-whaling states, and that "the Pacific has been turning against us".

Six Caribbean countries, including St Kitts and Nevis, where the IWC meeting will be held, will vote with Japan over the next three weeks. St Kitts and Nevis alone has received $24m (£12.7m) for fisheries development. Along with the other Caribbean countries, it can also expect to be given a whaling quota, which it can sell to whale-hunting countries.

The St Kitts meeting is expected to be the most vitriolic for years. Japan lost potentially groundbreaking decisions by only four votes a year ago in Korea.

Australia's environment minister Ian Campbell, who heads the IWC's anti-whaling faction, says that if Japan achieves a majority, the first step of the pro-whaling faction will be to disband the IWC's conservation committee. It will then overturn the commission's formal condemnation of Japan's so-called scientific whaling programme, which exploits the loophole in the moratorium to hunt for whales.

"It would effectively reverse the conservation direction the IWC has taken in recent years and take it back to its original set-up as a pro-whaling programme," Campbell said.

The pro-whaling group will then push for the secret ballot system, which will make it far easier to obtain the three-quarters majority it needs to overturn the moratorium.
Now pro-conservation countries, led by the so-called "like-minded" group of Australia, New Zealand, the US and Britain, have launched their own diplomatic effort. But it looks like they have left it too late.

Carter visited the South Pacific last week to lobby against whaling. He praised Kiribati (formerly the Gilbert Islands) for creating the third largest marine protected area in the world, and said New Zealand would offer a training and survey programme.

However, he failed to persuade the archipelago of Tuvalu to vote with the conservation camp, despite the fact that both New Zealand and Australia give it regular aid.

A Tuvaluan government official said: "Tuvalu should be allowed, as a sovereign nation, to make its independent decision on what is best for its people. We are for the sustainable use of whatever resources we have - be it whales, fish, forestry or land."

The whaling issue has even raised hackles between Norway and its traditional allies. Ambassadors from 12 anti-whaling countries, including Britain, have accused Norway of endangering minke whales.

Norway, the only country in the world to defy the moratorium openly, sets its own quotas based on what it insists is scientific evidence of sustainable whaling. It has set a quota of 1,052 minke whales for the 2006 season - an increase of over 300 whales from last year.

Japan kills nearly 900 whales a year, mostly minkes, under its "scientific research" programme, even though most of the animals end up on Japanese dinner tables. Iceland also operates a scientific whaling fleet.

Environmental groups, including Greenpeace, which dogs the whaling fleets, are gearing up for battle. Heather Rockwell, a board member of the Cetacean Society International, says that once in control, the pro-whaling majority will immediately begin to chip away at the safeguards against commercial hunting.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466006004918 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Already Japan is stepping up its defiance by launching a campaign to re-establish whale meat, now largely confined to specialist restaurants, within the mainstream Japanese diet. A new whale meat trading company, formed at the beginning of this month and affiliated to the government, is to sell 1,000 tonnes of whale meat at cheap prices to schools, hospitals and restaurants.

Hideki Moronuki, head of the agency's whaling section, says: "As whale meat is full of protein and low-fat - good traits for health - the new sales company is targeting hospitals as one of its consumers. We hope that whale meat will be enjoyed by as many people as possible at much cheaper prices."

Japan's ambassador to Australia, Hideaki Ueda, said last week that he hoped that the IWC would soon allow a return to commercial whaling. "If particular species are in danger of extinction we have to take care of them," he said, but argued that the minke whale - and even the far larger hump-backs, of which Japan intends to harvest 50 a year, were far from endangered.

Pursued Through History

THE British were not always so sentimental about whales. Fleets were dispatched to waters off Greenland, the South Atlantic and the Pacific to bring back the valuable oil.

In the 19th century, Dundee had a 16-ship whaling fleet bringing in up to £150,000 a year. The industry was a major contributor to the city's wealth, with whale oil mixed with water being used to soften jute so it could be woven.
Some scientists argue that existing populations face more danger from shipping, chemical pollution, climate change and depleted food supplies than from hunting. Others claim that if the ban is lifted, reduced populations will become even more vulnerable to man-made perils.
RIGHT WHALES
The population of the right whale is estimated at only 500 in the northern hemisphere, and is unlikely to survive the century. A population of around 7,500 exists in the southern hemisphere.

SEI WHALES
Heavily exploited in the 1960s and 1970s as other stocks declined. In the North Pacific, populations were slashed by four-fifths to just over 2,000.

FIN WHALES
Some pre-hunting estimates put numbers at 360,000, but they are down to 56,000 now.

HUMPBACK WHALES
Pre-hunt stocks are estimated at 240,000, but more than a century of slaughter has reduced that to around 10,000.

MINKE WHALES
North Atlantic estimates of the species most common in Scottish waters are a pre-hunt 265,000 - down to 149,000 now.

BLUE WHALES
These giants were hunted almost to extinction in the early 20th century. Numbers have recovered to around 10,000 after protection began in 1966.

SPERM WHALES
Highly prized for their huge oil reservoirs, whaling reduced numbers from more than one million to around 350,000.

Ian Mather is a diplomatic correspondent for The Scotsman. This article appeared in The Scotsman on May 21, 2006. Posted at Japan Focus on May 30, 2006.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466006004918 Published online by Cambridge University Press