

Japan: Whaling Becomes an Industry Out of Control

Japanese whaling in the 20th century has followed the same destructive pattern of massive over-exploitation common to all commercial whaling operations. Japanese high seas whaling, primarily in the Antarctic, began in the 1930s with the purchase of a Norwegian factory vessel. As with all countries, Japan's whalers targeted the largest whales first. As the larger species of whales disappeared, the whalers targeted the smaller species in ever increasing numbers. By the early 1930s, two species of whales, the grays and the rights, were already being reported as only occasional catches. The table below shows the difference between the Japanese whaling fleet's total catches in 1920 and 1960. The table clearly points to declines in larger species and increased kills of smaller species (sei and sperm) over 40 years time.



7/12/98 Noumea, New Caledonia
Greenpeace protests against Japanese whaling fleet
© Greenpeace/Dosdane

A History of Defiance

For almost 40 years, Japan has objected to almost every attempt by the International Whaling Commission to conserve particular populations of whales.

1964: The IWC votes a ban on the killing of blue whales. Japan files the first objection blocking protection.

1973: The IWC votes to establish a quota of 5,000 for the hunting of minke whales in the Antarctic. Japan files objections to this measure, and joins the USSR in setting higher quotas for themselves.

1985-6: The IWC moratorium on commercial whaling takes effect. Japan files an objection under which Japan and the USSR kill a combined total of 5,000 whales per year before stopping two years later.

1994: The IWC establishes the Southern Ocean Sanctuary, with Japan registering the lone opposing vote. Japan immediately files an objection, unilaterally raising its "scientific" whaling quota from 330 to 440, and subsequently setting quotas for an additional 100 whales in the North Pacific, also under the guise of science.

Species	1920	1960
Blue	37	1
Fin	443	131
Humpback	84	2
Sei	389	788
Gray	68	0
Right	4	0
Sperm	251	2,107
Total	1,279	3,029

Japan's "Scientific" Whaling: A Deadly Scam

In 1987, after being pressured by the United States to withdraw its objection to the moratorium, Japan began to kill 330 whales per year in the Antarctic under the guise of science. Under IWC rules, countries are permitted to issue permits for lethal research and it is this loophole in the convention that Japan has employed ever since to give its whaling a thin veil of respectability. As was reported by Japanese press at the time, the program was intended as a means of keeping the commercial whaling industry alive until the moratorium was lifted. Indeed, for each of the eleven years that Japan has conducted “scientific” whaling in the Antarctic, the IWC has condemned the program, saying the data generated by Japan’s lethal research is not needed for the comprehensive assessment of whale stocks or the management of whales.

Profiting from “Science”: The Japanese Market for Whale Meat

The whale meat and blubber that comes from Japan’s lethal whale research is marketed commercially in Japan. In 1998, the wholesale value of the 1,700 tons of whale meat caught in the Antarctic was about 3 billion yen. The retail value was up to three times as great. The IWC sent a strong message to Japan in 1994 by enacting the Southern Ocean Sanctuary by a 23-1 vote (Japan being the sole dissenter), determining that this area was in need of more permanent protection than the 1986 moratorium could provide. Japan again spurned the IWC by refusing to negotiate an end to its scientific whaling program. When a fire damaged Japan’s primary factory whaling ship in November 1998 and forced its return to Japan, threatening loss of income from the operation, the ship’s operators rushed the repairs and resumed whaling within the Southern Ocean Sanctuary by January. As of April 1, Japan killed 389 whales in the Sanctuary, and is now proposing its abolition. It is becoming increasingly clear that Japan has no interest in cooperating with the International Whaling Commission on matters that relate to long-term conservation of whale stocks. Japan has its sights set on the next meeting of the Convention on International Trade and Endangered Species (CITES) meeting in Nairobi in April, 2000, during which it is expected to be the most ardent proponent of re-opening the currently banned trade in whale products.



22/1/92 Southern Ocean
1991/92 Greenpeace expedition to the
Southern Ocean to protest against Japanese
whaling
© Greenpeace/Culley