

JAPANESE WHALING - THE TRUTH BEHIND THE FISHERIES AGENCY OF JAPAN'S PUBLIC RELATIONS CAMPAIGN

Introduction

The Fisheries Agency of Japan (FAJ) has stepped up its attempts to resume commercial whaling with a massive public relations campaign. This makes two remarkable claims: that whaling is necessary to control whale populations and keep them from eating too many fish; and that whaling is vital to Japan's culture. As part of the cultural argument, the Fisheries Agency of Japan also claims that Japan's whalers have a special relationship with whales. If these claims were true, it would add a new dimension to the debate over whaling. Let's examine each in turn.

Whales and fish

The latest attempt to justify resuming whaling is the argument that whales eat too many fish and so are in direct competition with fisheries. The Institute of Cetacean Research (ICR), the body which conducts Japan's so-called 'scientific' whaling, has prepared calculations which purport to show that whales eat between 280 and 500 million tonnes of food a year – three to six times as much seafood as all the world's fisheries put together. The IWC's scientists questioned the methods and data used in doing the calculations and they have not been endorsed by the IWC.

In fact, global fisheries are in a critical state as a result of over-fishing, not over-predation. Until commercial whaling decimated whale numbers, whales and fish were part of the ocean ecosystem and large populations of both existed in balance. This status quo persisted for tens of million years until the advent of industrial fishing in the last century. It is only now, after widespread industrial fishing and fisheries mismanagement have devastated the world's fisheries, that whales are being made a scapegoat.

Spokespeople for the Fisheries Agency of Japan have been quick to push the theory that whales need to be culled to protect fish stocks, despite the fact that there is no scientific basis for these claims. "Do you know that whales eat a great deal of saury and cuttlefish?" asks a report published by the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries in April 2001. The endorsement of the theory by the Fisheries Agency of Japan chooses to ignore a very important point – most of the seafood eaten by whales is not utilised by humans. For example, the baleen whales of the Antarctic eat only krill, which is of little commercial value. Likewise, sperm whales feed on squid that dive so deep and swim so fast that they are not targeted by fishermen.

The suggestion that catching whales could increase fish yields is based on an idea called the surplus yield hypothesis. If whales eat a particular sort of fish which is desired by fishermen (a target species) then, according to the theory, if you remove some whales from the ecosystem, fewer fish will be eaten and so there will be more to catch. Yet nature is not as simple as the theory and few marine biologists believe that the surplus yield hypothesis can be used to make predictions in the real world. Despite the lack of support for this theory from either the IWC or from fisheries experts, the Fisheries Agency of Japan is presenting it as a proven fact in its public relations battle to resume commercial whaling.

In fact, the presence of whales may even increase numbers of commercially valuable fish as whales may also eat fish that prey on the target species, so reducing the population of the fish predator. The overall effect may be that the whales are actually increasing the target species for the fishermen to catch. Furthermore, the idea that a population of marine mammals can promote

healthy fish stocks has already been accepted in practice. South Africa has considered and rejected a proposed cull of Cape fur seals on the grounds that it was more likely to lower catches of hake rather than increase them.

In reality, the major predator of fish in marine ecosystems are other fish. Seabirds also take fish in vast numbers. If the surplus yield hypothesis were valid, culls of these species would have to be taken. But the Fisheries Agency of Japan and other promoters of whaling never mention this.

The assertion that whales are in competition with commercial fisheries is based on pseudo science and is being put forward only by those with a vested interest in resuming whaling.

Whales and culture

Spokespeople for the Japanese whaling industry assert that Japanese people have a long history with whales and that traditions and culture on whales and whaling have been handed down from generation to generation, based on respect for the whales.

Japan does have a long history of coastal whaling. Archaeological finds indicate that whaling was carried on in prehistoric times. Japan's unique net whaling, invented in the middle of the 17th century, involved ten to twelve boats which positioned themselves in a semi-circle on the seaward side of the whale which was then driven toward the shore, then enmeshed in a very strong net, tied to a large piece of timber and finally killed. But this unique form of whaling was to be wiped out, along with most of Japan's coastal whale populations, by imported technology.

Catches in the five prefectures of the south-west, where whaling was mainly concentrated, were about 150 a year during the decade from 1882 to 1891. Then the whalers began to import equipment and modern industrial technology from Norway. This began with the chartering of Norwegian vessels and crews to catch whales in Japanese water, progressed to purchase of vessels from Norway and culminated in the building of Norwegian style whaling vessels in Japanese shipyards.

Norwegian style whaling in Japanese waters caught just 60 whales in 1901 but catches increased to over a thousand whales a year by 1907. By 1908, twelve whaling companies had sprung up operating twenty nine catcher boats in fierce competition and Japan's stock markets were gripped by 'whaling fever' – when one new company closed its new share subscription in January 1907, the capital had been over-subscribed 230 times. The less efficient net whaling could not compete and disappeared. By the mid 1920s, the average catch was over 1,500 per year and blue, fin, humpback, sei, gray and right whales were being taken.

This shift to heavily capitalised industrial whaling led to over exploitation and plummeting populations. As the larger species of whales disappeared, the whalers targeted the smaller ones in ever increasing numbers. By the early 1930s, gray and right whales were being recorded only as occasional catches. The blue whale catch, which was 438 a year in 1920, dropped below 10 a year in 1957 and ended in 1964. Catches of humpbacks ended in 1965 and catches of fin and sei whales ended a decade later in 1975. Sadly, the relationship of Japan's whalers with the whales they take proved to be no more special than the disastrous relationship of whalers to whales everywhere else in the world. They followed the destructive pattern of massive over-exploitation common to all commercial whaling operations and destroyed the populations of whales in Japan's waters.

Despite this, Japan's IWC delegation continues to say that their commercial whaling has a unique social and cultural significance not found in commercial whaling operations elsewhere, especially for four particular coastal towns. They claim that traditional Japanese customs, such as eating whale meat on festival occasions, have become 'endangered'. For over a decade, they have asked the IWC for a special quota of 50 whales to 'alleviate the distress' to these communities

and allow limited whaling for local consumption. But independent studies have shown no special hardship and every year the IWC has rejected the proposal.

Although Japan continues to request a relatively small quota of whales for the four coastal towns, the Fisheries Agency of Japan's primary goal is a resumption of high seas whaling with factory ships – the industrial whaling that devastated one population after another since its inception in 1925. This type of whaling has no roots in Japan at all. Like the modern catcher boat, which changed the face of Japan's coastal whaling, factory ship whaling was imported from Europe.

Although the public relations material supplied by the Fisheries Agency of Japan shows people in traditional dress and implies widespread support for whaling among the Japanese, this is far from the truth. A December 1999 poll (<http://www.mori.com/polls/1999/whaling.shtml>) found that only 10% of the Japanese public supported whaling and just as many opposed it. Most had no opinion or said it depended on the reason for killing or the method of killing. When asked if Japan's cultural identity would suffer if whaling were stopped, those who said "a great deal/a fair amount" were outweighed more than 3:1 by those who said "not very much/not at all".

What is really going on?

The Fisheries Agency of Japan is using hollow arguments about culture and the predation of whales on fish to claim that there are valid reasons for resuming commercial whaling. But, in fact, Japan's position at the IWC is led by the whaling industry which demands nothing less than a return to high seas whaling on the remnants of the great whale populations.