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## **SCIENCE, CULTURE OR COMMERCE? The truth about Japanese Whaling**

On the 6th November 2001, the Japanese whaling fleet left for Antarctic waters to hunt 440 minke whales. Japan claims that this hunt is for 'scientific research' but in reality it is just one tactic in a long-term strategy orchestrated by the Fisheries Agency of Japan (FAJ) to re-establish large-scale commercial whaling.

Today the FAJ is dangerously close to reaching its goal. With huge resources to back its campaign, the Agency has been steadily expanding its whaling operations. Now, by recruiting countries into the International Whaling Commission (IWC) with offers of Overseas Development Assistance (see the Greenpeace briefing *Buying a Return to Commercial Whaling*), it is a short step away from overturning the current ban on commercial whaling.

### **THE 'SCIENCE' LOOPHOLE**

It was only when many whale populations had been heavily depleted, after decades of uncontrolled whaling, that the IWC finally agreed to stop commercial whaling. A moratorium came into effect in 1986 and many of the countries that voted for it had once been whaling nations. Nine countries were still whaling when the moratorium was agreed but they had all given up by 1990 – except for Norway and Japan.

Japan has always steadfastly rejected moves to protect whales. In 1964, when the IWC decided to ban hunting blue whales in the Antarctic (after a total catch in the Antarctic of 112 the year before), it was Japan that filed the first objection and blocked protection. When catching of minke whales started in the Antarctic in the early 1970s and the IWC tried to set a quota at 5,000, Japan joined the USSR in filing objections and setting a higher quota for themselves. When the moratorium began in 1985/86 Japan and the USSR continued whaling under objections – catching 5000 whales a season for two more seasons.

In 1987 Japan was forced, by pressure from the United States, to withdraw its objection to the moratorium, but it had no intention of giving up its Antarctic whaling and immediately instigated a 'scientific' whaling programme. Under the IWC rules countries are permitted to issue permits for lethal research. It was all Japan needed - a loophole to give its whaling a thin veil of respectability. Japan's own media reported that the 'scientific' whaling was a means of keeping the industry alive until a way could be found to reverse the moratorium decision.

## BLOCKING THE SOUTHERN OCEAN SANCTUARY

In 1994, even though the moratorium on commercial whaling was already in effect, the IWC decided to give the whales around Antarctica greater protection by establishing the Southern Ocean Sanctuary. This would permanently ban commercial whaling in all the waters surrounding Antarctica. The Sanctuary protects three quarters of the world's whales in their feeding grounds. It protects depleted populations of blue, fin, sei and humpback whales and also the only population of great whales which has not been severely depleted by commercial whaling - the Antarctic minke whales. The near unanimous decision to create the Southern Ocean Sanctuary was passed by a vote of 23 - 1. Japan was the sole nation to vote against, and is the only nation to hold an objection to this decision, effectively removing itself from any obligation to respect the Southern Ocean Sanctuary.

## NEW THREATS IGNORED

Today Japan continues to ignore concerns for whale populations. The Fisheries Agency claims its 'scientific' whaling in the Antarctic, known as JARPA, is endorsed by the IWC. It claims that the data gathered is vital for the IWC to protect or "manage" whale populations. In fact the programme has been severely criticised by the IWC ever since its inception. In 1997 a special workshop of IWC scientists – including Japanese scientists - reviewed the programme and unanimously concluded that its results were **'not required for management'**.

At the last meeting of the IWC - in 2001 – the scientific committee showed a new and even greater concern about the Japanese programme. Resolution IWC/53/30 drew attention to the real possibility that the Southern Ocean population of minke whales may be in a worse state than previously thought. New data suggested population numbers considerably fewer than previously estimated. Without a concrete explanation for the suggested drop in numbers, the resolution warned that minke whales may have suffered a 'precipitous decline' and strongly urged the Government of Japan 'to halt the lethal takes of minke whales'.

## WHAT'S A WHALE WORTH?

'Scientific' whaling means big business for Japan. Since the data collected does not meet any critical research needs, its only real use would be for setting quotas. As well as that, all the whale meat from this so-called 'scientific' whaling ends up for sale on the domestic market.

*'Officially it [Japan] does not hunt whales, but kills 300 a year for "research purposes" a cover as thin as the slices of sashimi that a "researched" whale inevitably becomes.'* The Economist, October 25<sup>th</sup> 1997.

The Antarctic hunt yields approximately 2,000 tonnes of whale meat which is sold wholesale for about 4 billion yen (US\$ 32 million), but retails for about three times as much. The ICR also sells the meat from the North Pacific hunt and, now that they are taking 50 Bryde's whales per year in addition to 100 minke whales, the value of this hunt has increased dramatically. An adult North Pacific minke weighs 5 tonnes whereas adult Bryde's weigh between 12 and 20 tonnes.

Whale meat and blubber are luxury foods in Japan and on average a kilo of whale meat wholesales in Japan for about \$18, but some cuts sell for far more. The finest quality raw whale meat may fetch as much as \$400 a kilogram in Tokyo's best department stores.

## WHALING – RE-INVENTED AS SCIENCE

Japan's whaling is managed by the Institute for Cetacean Research (ICR). This was established in 1987 with US\$ 10 million from the whaling industry, and now runs on money from the sale of whale

meat in Japan together with a grant of approximately US\$ 9 million a year from the Government. In 1999/2000 the ICR's income was 60 million US dollars, the turnover of a medium sized business. It even spends money on public relations to promote a return to full-scale whaling.

The Japanese whaling fleet is leased to the ICR by a company called Kyodo Senpaku, which is jointly owned by major Japanese fisheries companies which were involved in commercial whaling prior to the moratorium. The fleet consists of the 7440 tonne factory vessel, the Nisshin Maru, three catcher boats and a spotter vessel. These are the same vessels that were hunting prior to the moratorium, except for the Yushin Maru catcher boat. This high speed catcher was launched in October 1998 and was described as 'a symbol of restarting commercial whaling'. The first new catcher boat to have been built by the Japanese in 26 years, the Yushin Maru is proof that Japanese whaling industry is clearly confident that it will see a return on its multimillion dollar investment.

**A QUESTION OF CULTURE? – JAPANESE WHALING HISTORY**

Japanese whaling in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been just as destructive through massive over-exploitation as all commercial whaling operations, but this is not what Japan's delegation to the IWC would have you believe. They claim that Japan's commercial whaling has a unique social and cultural significance not found in commercial whaling operations elsewhere. The evidence shows otherwise. Although Japan has a long history of coastal whaling, high seas whaling only began in the 1930s and all of Japan's whaling in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been based on imported technology. Equipped with this technology, Japanese whalers devastated one whale population after another, both in Japan's own coastal waters and on the high seas.

**Japan's coastal whaling**

Whaling in Japan began in prehistoric times - but it was coastal whaling and on a small scale. By the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century a unique net whaling had been invented. Ten to twelve boats made a semi-circle on the seaward side of the whale. They drove the animal toward the shore, enmeshed it in a strong net and tied it to a heavy piece of timber so it could be killed. Catches were concentrated in the five prefectures of the Southwest. About 150 whales were killed each year between 1882 and 1891.

Norwegian technology radically changed the style and scale of Japan's whaling. At the turn of the century Japanese whalers chartered Norwegian vessels and crews to hunt in Japanese waters. Later they bought some Norwegian ships and finally they built their own in Japanese shipyards. By 1908 12 whaling companies had sprung up, operating 29 catcher boats in fierce competition and Japan's stock markets were gripped by 'whaling fever'. When one new company closed the subscription of shares in January 1907, the capital had been over-subscribed 230 times. The 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 species in ever increasing numbers. By the mid 1920's, the average catch was over 1,500 whales per year and blue, fin, humpback, sei, gray and right whales were all being taken. By the early 1930's, gray and right whales were being recorded only as occasional catches. The blue whale catch 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.

Here is a comparison between catch records for 1920 and 1960:

	Blue whale	Fin whale	Hump-back whale	Sei whale	Gray whale	Right whale	Sperm whale	Total
1920	37	443	84	389	68	4	251	1,279
1960	1	131	2	778	-	-	2,107	3,029

Spokesmen for the Japanese whaling industry cite Japan's long history with whales as a reason to protect tradition and culture handed down from generation to generation. The truth is, as soon as modern technology became available, Japanese shore-based operations moved in on the traditional hunting and proceeded to decimate the whale populations on which coastal whalers depended.

### **Ship turn into factories.**

Japan's Antarctic whaling began in 1934. The main product was whale oil, sold abroad to provide foreign currency. Salted whale meat was a by-product sold in Japan. Japanese whaling companies purchased the plans for a factory ship from the UK and by 1936 had built their own. By the 1937-38 season Japan was operating 4 factory ships in the Antarctic. Oil for sale abroad was the main product and most meat was discarded. High seas whaling in the North Pacific began in 1940. Japan's pelagic (high seas) whaling in the Antarctic progressed from the largest whales to the smallest. After the moratorium was in place and Japan was finally forced to give up its commercial whaling, it simply transformed its hunting fleet, repackaging it so that within a few months scientific whaling began.

### **Expanding operations - The thin edge of the wedge**

Since then Japan has been gradually increasing its operations. In 1995 it increased its Antarctic quota from 330 whales to 440 and during the 1996/7 whaling season expanded the area in which the fleet operated. It first started in Antarctic Area V (the Western South Pacific) but has now spread into Antarctic Area VI (the Eastern South Pacific).

In 1994 a second 'scientific' hunt was started in the North Pacific (known as JARPN) and this took 100 minke whales a year until 2000. In 2000 the North Pacific hunt was expanded despite widespread international condemnation and two new species, sperm and Bryde's whales, were targeted in addition to the minke whales. In February a Japanese wire service obtained plans which revealed that this year the North Pacific hunt will be expanded yet again, taking a further 50 minke whales and 50 sei whales, a species which is officially listed as an endangered species on the IUCN redlist.

So far the Japanese whaling fleet has taken 5,760 whales under the guise of its so-called 'scientific' whaling programmes, but it is clear from statements made by Japanese officials that they see these hunts as a precursor to much larger annual takes and the expanded North Pacific hunt is termed euphemistically as a 'feasibility study'.

### **WHAT DO THE JAPANESE PEOPLE THINK?**

The Fisheries Agency of Japan claims that the Japanese public support whaling and defend the whale meat industry. But in 1999 a MORI research study conducted on behalf of the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) and Greenpeace found that the majority of Japanese people have no firm view on whether commercial whaling should continue. Only 24% say it is important, 25% say not - and half are undecided. Furthermore, even among whaling's defenders, two in five (42%) predict that there would not be much, or any, damage to Japan's cultural identity if whaling were to stop. It is no longer considered an important part of their cultural diet, as three in five (61%) have not eaten it since childhood, if at all.

These results were echoed by the results of an independent poll released on 30<sup>th</sup> March 2002 by the Japanese national newspaper, Asahi Shimbun. The Asahi poll also showed Japanese attitudes toward whales to be significantly different than those reflected in a government commissioned poll released two weeks previously. In that poll, which used leading questions, the Japanese government found that 75% of the Japanese people favour a return to commercial whaling under controlled

conditions. The Asahi Shimbun poll in contrast showed that only 47% of the Japanese public agree with whale hunting and 30% opposed it. Support for whaling is down by 7% from Asahi Shimbun's 1993 poll figure showing 53% of those polled supporting whale hunting.

Significantly, the Asahi Shimbun's poll which questioned 3000 people reveals a shift in attitude toward supporting the protection of whales based upon a concern for damage to the marine eco-system and away from a concern that the rest of the world is bashing Japan because of its food culture.

The fact that the majority of Japanese people do not eat whale meat is recognised by Joji Morishita, head of the whaling section of the Fisheries Agency of Japan, who in a recent article in a Japanese newspaper (Suisan Keizai, 19th June, 2001) was quoted as saying "we must not lose whale food culture and have to consider seriously methods of sale".

## **CONCLUSION**

The science in Japanese whaling has always been a sham. Now it's widely recognised as such. Today it's not only clear that the Japanese Government intends to resume commercial whaling – it's a worrying fact that it is perilously close to achieving it! The 2002 IWC will be crucial for the future of the whales.

Today the Japanese "scientific" fleet is out in Antarctica attempting to catch hundreds of minke whales – tomorrow commercial whalers could be catching thousands, just as they did before the moratorium.