RESAVE THE WHALES

COMMON SENSE BLOWS HOLES THROUGH JAPAN'S WHALING POLICY

BY CLARE PERRY

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IT IS WIDELY EXPECTED THAT JAPAN will gain a narrow majority of votes in favor of whaling at the International Whaling Commission (IWC) meeting in St. Kitts next week. While this will be hailed as a victory by pro-whaling countries, a three-quarter majority vote is required to actually overturn the ban on commercial whaling, and Japan has some way to go before achieving this. And since Japan has continued commercial whaling ever since the ban, albeit under the banner of scientific research, what difference will this ruling really make?

The answer is that with a simple majority, the pro-whalers can dictate the agenda, the opinion and the working rules of the IWC. For example, after years of condemning "scientific" whaling, the Commission will suddenly be wholly supportive of it and encourage new lethal research programs. After years of supporting transparency in votes, the IWC will allow secret ballots, a move that will surely encourage more vote buying and double dealing.

But why does Japan continue whaling? This position is not in line with its views on other environmental issues, and there is very little domestic public support for it. The government's usual response is that whaling is part of Japanese culture, and anti-whaling countries are accused of cultural imperialism or even racism. In reality, however, whale meat was only widely consumed in Japan after World War II to alleviate food shortages.

Japan claims that its whaling industry is protecting the principle of sustainable utilization and that whales are no different from other marine species. It also cites the fact that the Whaling Convention was originally intended to regulate whaling, not protect whales. This is central to Japan's new strategy for the IWC, termed "normalization."

It's true that the IWC was originally a whalers' club, but things have changed drastically since it was set up in 1946. "Normalization" in the 21st century would mean accepting that environmental degradation of the marine environment is such that wild ocean mammals should just be left alone. They have enough to cope with from climate change, pollution and bycatch.

Despite the Japanese government's insistence that it supports "sustainable utilization of marine resources," all evidence is to the contrary. The appalling history of commercial whaling is well-known; less well-known is that a similar environmental catastrophe is ongoing in Japan's coastal waters.

Each year, Japanese fishermen hunt around 20,000 "small cetaceans" —dolphins, porpoises and smaller whales that were not protected by the IWC moratorium. This practice is cruel, unsustainable and almost wholly uncontrolled. The hand-harpoon hunt of Dall's Porpoises in northern Japan is the largest predation of any cetacean species, and has been so for the last 25 years.

The government sets a catch quota of 17,700 Dall's Porpoises each year. This is despite evidence of the creatures' declining population in the Sea of Japan, where hunters target nursing females because they travel slowly to protect their calves and are easier to kill. The calves are left to starve, and the population is on the fast track to extinction as its breeding potential is wiped out. Even Dall's Porpoise hunters have admitted that they are "strangling their own necks."

At the other end of Japan, thousands of dolphins and whales die each year in drive hunts, which mostly take place in Wakayama, but occasionally closer to Tokyo in Shizuoka. These hunts have attracted publicity because they are so obviously inhumane that fishermen are instructed by the Fisheries Agency to hide their hunt from the public eye. Several striped dolphin populations have declined as a result of the drive hunts, both before and since the moratorium.

"Sustainable utilization," then, is not at the forefront of Japan's cetacean policy. While some officials state that denying Japan whale meat is "culinary imperialism," it seems hard to believe that this is what drives the relentless campaign to overturn the ban. The government stockpile of whale meat reached 5,000 tons last year. Demand is low and declining, while demand for dolphin and porpoise meat is even lower. The fact that dolphin and porpoise are highly polluted with mercury and other dangerous chemicals doesn't help. Our research indicates that more than 2,500 Japanese retail outlets have stopped selling whale and dolphin meat in the past five years, many because of health concerns.

JON SIEGEL

JAPAN ACCUSES ANTI-WHALING COUNTRIES OF CULTURAL IMPERIALISM

So why does Japan spend billions of yen advocating whaling in defiance of a global moratorium and international opinion? And why does it do so when the resumption of commercial whaling isn't guaranteed, when very few Japanese people actually care, and when even fewer want to eat whale meat? The answer must lie with the Fisheries Agency officials who decide Japan's whaling policy. Perhaps these influential bureaucrats see the end of whaling as a blow to their political power at a time when global fish stocks are in big trouble. Certainly, they will fight the notion—seemingly with an unlimited budget—that any one species cannot be sustainably harvested.

So how can we save the whales—again? Change really needs to come from within, but Japanese NGOs cannot penetrate the Fisheries Agency bureaucracy, which has labeled "anti-whaling" as "anti-Japan." Most NGOs here won't touch the subject.

Perhaps our best hope will come from the whales themselves. Whale-watching is a growing, billion-dollar industry that's thriving in Japan. By maintaining the moratorium on commercial whaling and preventing its resumption around the world, we can surely buy enough time to give this industry a voice—a voice that, it is hoped, will persuade the Japanese government that whales are more valuable alive than dead. M

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