

## **Japan heats up whaling wars**

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The battle over whaling has grown more acrimonious in recent years principally because Japan has become a more vociferous and belligerent advocate for a resumption of commercial whaling. In the recently concluded meeting of the International Whaling Commission (IWC), Japan's representative browbeat and threatened other member nations, including the United States, in an effort to get its way. As a result, the Fisheries Agency has scored the diplomatic equivalent of an own-goal. Japan continues to hunt whales -- killing some 2,000 this year alone -- under the cover of "scientific research."

Its image has been further battered by allegations that it is aggressively leveraging its aid programs to island nations in the South Pacific and Caribbean to sway votes its way.

Given widespread indifference among the Japanese public about whaling and eating whale meat, why is the government pursuing such a confrontational foreign policy? It is important to bear in mind that the pro-whaling lobby in Japan does not represent a consensus view among Japanese, many of whom prefer whale-watching to nibbling on the fruits of research whaling. However, the government does favor resumption of whaling and is seeking to end the moratorium on whaling that did save the whales. Given that Japanese whaling operations nearly drove some species into extinction, its plans to resume commercial whaling have understandably drawn special scrutiny from conservationists all over the world.

Japan's case rests on culture, science, principle and propaganda. Whale consumption is portrayed as a deeply embedded culinary tradition and anti-whaling activists are accused of cultural imperialism. To advocates, eating whale meat is an issue of national identity, an identity that is under siege on many fronts. They also argue that science is on their side, citing studies that show a strong recovery among certain whale species that would permit a resumption of managed whaling.

There is also a sense that Japan has been double-crossed by anti-whaling nations in the IWC. Japan agreed to a moratorium on whaling, not a permanent prohibition, and IWC rules specify that whaling policies should be driven by science. So there is a perception that anti-whaling nations have hijacked the IWC and made it into a vehicle to impose their views on conservation regardless of science.

Standing up for whaling is thus projected as a matter of principle. And this is where the propaganda machine kicks in, hammering home the idea that Japan is the target of double standards. Otherwise urbane and sophisticated Japanese officials can suddenly morph into sputtering jingoists over the subject of whaling, exuding self-righteous indignation.

How has whaling become a talismanic symbol of Japanese identity? The Institute of Cetacean Research (ICR), funded by the government, is in the business of promoting whaling and also orchestrates a media campaign to convince Japanese that whaling is part

of their national identity. They also try to spur whale consumption, but to little avail. The major problem for advocates of whaling is that Japanese consumers are not buying even heavily subsidized whale meat; one third of the harvest of "scientific research" remains unsold. That is why whale is being processed into dog treats. The trend toward declining whale consumption preceded the moratorium on whaling and now very few Japanese are eating it even though it is widely available at reasonable prices.

Japan's taxpayers are paying for this mind-boggling boondoggle, subsidizing research whaling expeditions that gain international opprobrium while funding a research institute that produces little research and also markets whale meat at tax-subsidized prices that most Japanese don't want.

The claim that resumption of whaling is based on solid science also doesn't wash. The data is dodgy, hard to confirm and tainted for a number of reasons. DNA testing reveals mislabeling of whale meat sold in Japanese markets to hide the fact that species in danger of extinction are being killed for a research program of dubious merits. So even if it is possible to sensibly manage whaling of some species, there is little confidence that whaling won't also involve endangered species.

Science is also inconvenient in exposing the dangers of whale consumption. There have been public health warnings that there are extremely high concentrations of toxic chemicals -- PCBs and mercury -- in whale meat, and pregnant women have been warned not to eat any at all. Advocates have also blamed declining fish stocks on too many hungry whales, the scientific equivalent of blaming sheep flatulence for ozone depletion. Fishery resources have been badly mismanaged, a problem of over-fishing that raises legitimate concerns over proposals to manage whale stocks.

Conservationists are relieved that Japan lost four substantive votes on whaling and only prevailed -- by one vote -- on a non-binding declaration that reiterates the principles of the IWC. This minor propaganda victory is already being milked for what its worth. However, given dismal prospects for overturning the moratorium -- 75 percent of the votes are required to do so -- Japan will continue to evade it through research whaling.

As IWC delegates prepare for the next annual meeting in Anchorage, emotions on both sides are running high, trumping science and sensible compromises. The acrimonious impasse, and harpooning, will continue.

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