

Japan's Twelve-year Battle for Coastal Minke Whaling: Twelve Years of Frustration



(courtesy: Shoko Museum of Arts)

I. Absurd, Absurd, Absurd

In retrospect, it does seem absurd: that for almost all of the last decade of the 20th century, one of the world's leading developed economies was forced to spend millions of man-hours and dollars trying valiantly to minimise all traces of commercial aspects (for which read monetary exchange) from one of its traditional industries....

And that it, in good faith, undertook these futile attempts to conform to blatantly and irresponsibly anti-scientific whimsies of co-signatories to an international agreement which, in its very preamble, referred to providing "for the proper conservation" of resources to "... make possible orderly development" of the industry which depended upon these resources.

It is indeed absurd, for in the global monetary system of the 1990s, no one anywhere could engage

in any whaling activity at any level of technical sophistication without at least some cash transactions for gear, equipment, and related necessities.

Nonetheless, Japan's small-type coastal whalers, working with the Government of Japan, have tried and tried and tried yet again to answer the increasingly specious, increasingly transparently anti-whaling objections of the — ironically — anti-whaling members of the International Whaling Commission (IWC).

Why? Because, unlike a majority of the other nations which signed the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling (ICRW), Japan thought it important, essential actually, to continue to honour its commitment not only to the orderly development of the whaling industry, but also to establish an international system for whaling that would ensure proper and effective conservation and development of whale stocks.

Japan had also thought that because the



Whaling Vessel "Yasumaru No.1" in Operation in 1987
(courtesy: SHIMOMICHI Yoshiichi)

ICRW's preamble included the acknowledgement that achieving this optimum condition should happen "without causing widespread economic and nutritional distress" that its small-type coastal community whalers would not at any time suffer.

Wrong. Unfortunately, it has not worked that way. Quite the opposite. And even IWC itself has recognised this — nearly six years ago at the 45th IWC meeting in Kyoto. The resolution the Commission passed then affirmed that the IWC would work expeditiously to alleviate the distress to Japan's four coastal whaling communities which the cessation of minke whaling had caused. (The North Pacific minke whales are not now nor never have been either threatened or endangered, but the moratorium in 1982 was written so broadly that they were included.)

Despite this 1993 resolution, however, nothing has happened. The Government of Japan and the Japanese coastal whalers have, each and every year since then tried (the IWC record now includes some 50 papers in support of the Japanese small-type whalers by scientists and scholars from around the world) to answer the increasingly unreasonable and unrealistic demands to de-commercialise their traditional industry.

All to naught. Their honest efforts have brought only ever-more disingenuous objections from the anti-whaling zealots.

It is now clear that the anti-whaling nations will never be satisfied. So, for the Japanese small-type coastal whalers, frustration has finally entirely replaced their hopes that just one more accommodation, one more retreat from the fundamentals of their industry, would finally convince all the doubters — or at least enough of them — of their communities' desperate need for relief from the unnecessary North Pacific minke whaling moratorium.

Whaling is, after all, an industry, and thus, by definition, involves financial transactions. But

Japanese small-type coastal whaling is, perhaps, not so easily understood as an industry in Western 20th century terms for at least three interrelated reasons:

(1) it takes place in a culture whose underlying philosophies are fundamentally different from Western culture;

(2) specifically, the large number of community social and spiritual elements which are equally part of small-type coastal whaling apparently distract the inattentive and unwilling from seeing that this traditional form of whaling is a profession, a way to make a living to enable the whalers, their families, and their communities to continue to live in ways which have made their lives meaningful for generations and which have not harmed the resources on which it is dependent; and

(3) it is now a relatively unusual industry — although international history clearly shows us it has not always been so.

Now, finally, after a dozen years, surely it must be understood that these people and their communities have earned, with all of their good faith efforts, the right to return to the way of life of which politically-motivated, unscientific emotionalism has deprived them.

A dozen years of working for justice and logic to prevail is many years too long. The IWC by now must recognise that the communities of Abashiri, Ayukawa, Wada and Taiji should be free to resume coastal whaling — which, under the ICRW, should never have been interrupted, if the IWC itself is to recover any vestige of scientific credibility as a responsible global management organisation — instead of one just frittering away its time and





Whaling Festival in Taiji (courtesy: KAINO Yoshitsugu)

money trying to turn back the world's economic clock.

II. Absurd Scientifically, Absurd Socially and Economically

IWC's long-running prejudice against Japan's small-type coastal whaling is demonstrably absurd, not only scientifically, but also socially and economically. Even the briefest look at the facts makes this clear.

Scientifically Absurd...

What, after all, is the intent of the ICRW: to conserve and to utilise whales, or merely to "protect" them and delay any responsible management actions on their behalfs?

Japan and a minority of other IWC Members have stressed that the ICRW is about conserving and using whales, not about only protecting them. The Convention is also about using science as the basis for management. The so-called morality and ethics of whaling has nothing to do with science; it is delaying tactics.

But even if it were a legitimate concern under the ICRW, there is a standard and widely-agreed-upon ethical principle governing the use of living resources. Adopted by almost all members of the United Nations, it declares resource use is justified, provided it is sustainable and does not damage biological diversity, and that such resource use should be encouraged if it promotes social and economic benefit.

Both the 1980 World Conservation Strategy and the 1992 United Nations Earth Summit's Agenda 21 recognised the social and environmental benefits of sustainable resource use and urged implementation of this principle as a responsible and desirable course of action.

Certainly, all of what the scientists have been learning about the importance of multi-species management reinforces the need to broaden our approach to managing marine resources to include whales as part of the ecosystems in which they are found. Whales are substantial predators on fish and other species. Not surprisingly, it has not worked to manage them or other marine mammals in isolation.

It is the Okhotsk Sea stock of North Pacific minke whales in which Japan's small-type coastal whalers are interested, a robust stock which has never been in any trouble. Indeed, the IWC Scientific Committee had estimated that this stock stands at over 25,000 animals and is capable of sustaining a limited catch—which is all the small-type coastal whalers are seeking. From 1951 until 1987, for example, their average annual catch was 348 minke whales, and their 1987 quota was 320 minkes. Japanese small-type whaling was always a sustainable operation.

Economically and Socially Absurd

Given that there are clearly commercial elements of the whaling operations of other groups allowed to continue whaling, the argument about commercialism in Japanese STCW is not a legitimate objection. Why have the "commercial" aspects of Japan's small-type coastal whaling been an issue? Alaskan whalers buy equipment to go whaling and sell handicrafts made from whales they take and Japan's STCW is no more commercial than the approved Greenland Inuit whaling operations. After all, they sell whale products at local supermarkets. In addition, the well-documented cultural need of Japan's whaling communities to resume whaling is no less than that of a group of American natives who have not been whaling for 70 years but were given a quota at the 1997 meeting.



Minke Whales (courtesy: The Institute of Cetacean Research)



(courtesy: Shoko Museum of Arts)

Certainly, neither the debate about the commercial elements of Japan's STCW nor the earlier "concern" opponents expressed regarding the "morality and ethics" of Japan's STCW have much to do with IWC Members' treaty responsibilities to manage whale resources. Rather, they represent, for the Japanese, a frustrating 12 years of irresponsible political games, hypocrisy and the application of double standards which has caused severe hardships to Japan's STCW communities and resulted in a further erosion of the IWC's credibility as a responsible resource management organisation.

Nor is the issue one of economics alone, for life is much more than simply money with which to buy those things necessary for survival. Whaling, with its secondary and tertiary industries, is economically important. But as well, around the work of a community evolve social and cultural practices which define that community. For the small-type coastal whaling communities, whaling is the work around which these practices grew, defining their senses of community. It is their culture and part of the larger culture of Japan. Decline of small-type coastal whaling is causing disintegration of these communities. They are trying so hard to overcome the almost-debilitating losses of population and income.

As whaling-related employment decreases, so does the essence of community. Both economics and this diminished sense of community are forcing younger people to work and live elsewhere. Because of the locations of these communities and their relatively limited infrastructures, alternative jobs in whaling communities remain too few to replace those which Western cultures have taken from them by their continued insistence on the 1982 moratorium.

Even the IWC, in its 1993 resolution, acknowledged the socio-economic and cultural needs of the Japanese whaling communities and

the distress to these communities which has resulted from the cessation of minke whaling.

In conclusion, not only is there limited alternative work available to these communities, but also — and perhaps even more important — the cessation of minke whaling is slowly, and quite unnecessarily, eroding in these places their sense of community, their cultural heritage, and its practices. It is unnecessary, and it must stop.

III. Japan Is Committed to Restore Small-type Coastal Whaling

Six years ago, at the IWC meeting in Kyoto, the chairman of the Japan Small-type Whaling Association said,

...Our lives [in Japan's small-type whaling communities] are culturally simpler and economically simpler than the lives of those in Japan's cities. But we too are part of the history and the modern life of Japan... We in simpler communities also have responsibilities. We provide food for the people who share our lives. In this way we make our contribution to society. And we are proud that we make this contribution.

It is also our responsibility, our duty, and our wish to pass on to the next generation this way of living and of contributing. Those who have nothing to do with our way of life in local communities have no right to try to deny us this responsibility.

For the whalers and their communities this is how it is. Their very great efforts to resume their traditional community way of life continue. And will continue.

To the IWC, they say it is time to stop unfairness and double standard toward Japan's community-based whalers. Honour your treaty commitments and obligations. Japan and Japanese community-based whalers have co-operated with the IWC. If the IWC continues to ignore our cultural, socio-economic and dietary needs, Japan will be forced to take unilateral action to defend and maintain its whaling communities and their people. Japan has heard enough words of "compassion." Japan wants IWC action. Now.

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