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By David McNeill

It is a question that puzzles much of the world: Why does Japan thumb its nose at one of the environmental movement's few lasting achievements—the ban on commercial whaling? As Japan's whaling fleet ploughs the Antarctic in search of minke and endangered fin, David McNeill talks to politicians, bureaucrats, journalists and environmentalists and finds that far from weakening in the face of worldwide condemnation, the campaign to overturn the ban is gathering strength. February 2007, indeed, sees an important attempt by Japan to bypass what it perceives as the paralysis of the International Whaling Conference (IWC), when Tokyo plays host to a gathering dubbed the Conference for the Normalization of the International Whaling Commission. Despite being boycotted by New Zealand, Britain, the United States and around 20 other countries, many fear that this conference could seal the fate of the IWC.

The Japanese catcher ship Yushin Maru harpoons a whale in the Southern Ocean, January 7, 2006. © Greenpeace/ J. S. Hibbert

'Decadent and Dying': The International Whaling Commission

For journalists used to the smooth diplomatic hum of the global conference

circuit, covering the poisonous annual meetings of the International Whaling Commission (IWC) is akin to being slapped on the face with a slab of week-old minke. Government representatives from across the world squeeze into tax-funded conference halls and tear verbal strips off each other in language that is almost comically impolitic.

'Barbaric,' 'cruel' and 'imperialist' are part of the standard lexicon of insults traded by delegates with elephant-like memories for barbs inflicted decades ago. Top of the list is June 30th, 1979, when anti-whaling protestors in London chanted 'murderers' and 'barbarians' at stunned Japanese bureaucrats and splashed them with red paint; an experience burned deep into the collective cortex of the Japanese Fisheries Agency (FA).

Discussion moves at the pace of a harpooned humpback, bogged down by bickering and grandstanding. At the last IWC meeting in St. Kitts, delegates even called for a vote on the translation of a single word. "I couldn't believe how decadent the IWC had become," says environmental consultant Rémi Parmentier, who has been involved in the anti-whaling movement for decades. "This organization is really sick. No international body can function like this."

Yet terminally ill as the IWC is, this has been the main international forum for debate on whaling since 1949. As whales have climbed to the top of the endangered list and become a sort of poster child for the plunder of the environment, the debate there has grown increasingly vitriolic and uncompromising.

Emboldened in St. Kitts by the pro-whaling lobby's first IWC majority in over two decades, Iceland has again begun selling fin-whale meat and Japan's whaling fleet has stepped up its 'scientific whaling' hunt for 1,070 minke and 170 Bryde's, sei, sperm and fin whales. In 2007, it will also kill 50 humpbacks, a 'red-list' endangered species and one of the dying planet's most beloved mammals.

Japan's determination to thumb its nose at the whaling ban puzzles many, not least because the domestic whaling industry is on life support, kept alive by a steady infusion of government cash. Whale eating is now a minor, luxury pastime. Even before the moratorium, its popularity was plummeting.

In the year that 'scientific whaling' began in 1987, 70 tons of whale meat went unsold from a catch of 1,873, a tiny fraction of the 230,000 metric tons consumed in the peak whaling year of 1962. The whale-meat inventory reached a record 6,000 tons after the return of Japanese whaling fleets from the Antarctic this year, according to researcher Junko Sakurai. Japan, in other words, risks worldwide opprobrium for a product it can't sell.

"What is Japan *doing*?" said an exasperated Chris Carter, New Zealand's conservation minister, during the humpback debate in St. Kitts. "It seems determined to anger the world." Ben Bradshaw, the UK's environmental secretary, expressed the British view. "I can't understand it. We are a great friend and ally of Japan in almost every other field. And it is completely inexplicable to me that Japan, Norway, and Iceland continue to push for a resumption of commercial whaling."

The View from Japan

The FA, which drives the pro-whaling campaign in Japan, naturally sees things very differently. Among FA bureaucrats, there is thinly veiled contempt for the finger-wagging of Britain and New Zealand, a country with millions of acres of rich farm land and a tiny population. Japan's food self-sufficiency in contrast, is extremely low—just 40 percent, down from 73 percent in 1965.

What right does NZ have to tell us how to use the global sea commons? asks Nakamae Akira, Deputy Director General of the FA. "The reason that New Zealand, Australia and Britain are involved is just egotism. It is quite simple: the countries that are not involved should stay out of the problem. In the high seas, we divide up all resources, so why not whales?"

The FA has successfully positioned itself at home as the embattled defender of Japan's rights to an equitable share of marine resources. Whaling is the rhetorical line in the sand, beyond which lies that beloved staple of the Japanese dinner table: tuna. Adding to their siege mentality, fisheries bureaucrats also believe they face a growing war for dwindling resources with China.

"If we lose on whales, what will happen next?" asks Nakamae. "It is not just us taking the fish. We take six million tons of fish a year, which is about five percent of the total global catch of 120 million tons. China alone takes 40 million tons, approaching half of the total. In the last decade the amount of fish China takes has exploded."

Japan has indeed scaled down its marine fishing, but brokers operating for giant Japanese trading companies increasingly purchase fish from other countries. Environmentalists say many of the 132 tuna boats recently scrapped in a voluntary agreement by Japan have ended up in China and Taiwan, whose fishermen help supply the Japanese market.

Nevertheless, the voracious and increasingly affluent market of 1.3 billion people next door to Japan is part of the murky background to the whaling debate. The possibility that tuna may one day disappear from Japan's dinner plates is a specter regularly invoked by the Japanese media, and to this old story must now be added new bogeymen: China, and the hungry whales themselves.

The FA says the minke (the smallest of the whales) and several other species have recovered and are gobbling fish at a rate five times faster than that of humans, a claim likened by one environmentalist to blaming the woodpecker for the destruction of the rainforests. A research project published in a November 2006 edition of *Science* magazine forecast that these sea resources will completely collapse by 2050. But pro-whalers in Japan suggest the problem is a 'lack of balance' in the oceans. "Whales eat a lot of fish," argues LDP lawmaker Hamada Yasukazu, a leading member of the Parliamentary Whaling League. "We have to return balance to the oceans by cutting down their numbers."

Hamada and his colleagues believe Japan has compromised by staying in the IWC, adhering—at least officially—to the moratorium and by spending billions of yen a year collecting scientific data on the oceans. Whales are now among the most researched animals in the world, ironically making it easier for pro-whalers to argue that hunting can restart. And some conservationists support them.

"It is quite clear that there is minimal risk to whale stocks from hunting," says Sato Tetsu, Professor of Ecology and Environmental Sciences in Nagano University. "We have a method and a system to sustainably manage wildlife and resources, so why don't we try it?"

Far from wilting under global pressure, the pro-whaling lobby in Japan is growing stronger and more confident that its scientific data is correct. "As long as the anti-whaling countries cannot show us that we are mistaken, we will continue to follow this policy," says Nakamae. "We will keep going until the world understands this."

Voodoo Nationalism

Many environmentalists around the world hope that the whaling issue in Japan will simply fade with the now moribund industry. In Japan, though, the political pro-whaling lobby has never been stronger.

Hayashi Yoshimasa, leading member of Japan's Parliamentary Whaling League, in his Diet office, August 2006. © David McNeill

The campaign is backed by the 98-strong Parliamentary Whaling League, whose illustrious members include Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, LDP high-flier Hayashi Yoshimasa (both are from the whaling district of Shimonoseki), Foreign Minister Aso Taro and Yokohama Mayor Nakata Hiroshi.

All the major political parties back whaling—even the Communists—and the Diet boasts just one vocal anti-whaling lawmaker—Kina Shokichi, from Okinawa. Supporting the anti-whaling cause in Japan would be as politically popular here as cheering on whaling boats in the British Houses of Parliament.

These politicians champion logic and science, but it is clear that nationalism is one of the pillars that props up the whaling campaign. Many of the most active leaguers are on the right of the political spectrum, and the vast majority has no electoral or commercial ties to whaling: Just over ten percent come from districts with a direct connection to the whaling industry.

Discussions about the loss of whaling are inevitably tinged with loss of national pride. This from Hamada: "We're talking about managed whaling, so why are we being told that hunting whales is wrong? We were told to stop eating whale because of pressure from abroad and that it is barbarous. They eat dogs in South Korea and monkeys in China, and they call that barbarous too. We should start by accepting the other side's culinary culture and avoid telling them what to do."

Such is the consistency of these conversations that it is possible to construct a single narrative: 'We have been hunting and eating whales since the Jomon Period (8000 B.C.–300 B.C). After World War II, we were starved of protein and were encouraged by the US occupiers to hunt whale again. They then

forced Japan to stop and criticized its eating customs as 'barbaric.' Now they ignore science, flout logic and embrace emotionalism in the face of our reasonable requests to return to sustainable whaling.'

This narrative even intersects with one of Japan's key historical nexuses: the Meiji Restoration, when, under threat from the West, the country began the transformation from a closed, feudal society to a modern, trading nation. Pro-whalers seldom fail to point out that the agent of this change, Admiral Matthew Perry, whose 'black ships' are credited with opening Japanese ports to trade, was on a mission for the whaling industry, which needed safe ports and supplies for its crews.

"The credit for opening Japan went to the United States, and the common belief is that the United States was a kind of benefactor…but I don't support [that idea or] that Japan's development as a modern nation came from an acceptance of US demands," said Mayor Nakata recently. "What America wanted to do basically was to facilitate its whaling operations…It was in its national interests to protect and secure its supply base."

For nationalists, the whaling controversy and the loss of the industry are forever linked with the hypocrisy of the West and the humiliation of having to enter the modern world under pressure from US gunboats. This original sin has since been compounded by the pillaging of the oceans by Western whalers (ignoring Japan's own history of over-hunting) and the forced withdrawal from the industry in the 1980s.

It is surely no accident that pro-whaling sentiment grew in Japan as its economic and political crisis worsened in the 1990s. Despite the fact that the whaling issue was, in the words of former FA senior official, Masayuki Komatsu, 'dead in the water' in the late 1980s and that the government was rumored to be about to 'euthanize' the industry, it has since been brought juddering back to life by voodoo nationalism.

Hamada, for example, is quite explicit about why the whaling campaign is so important: "I think it is the *only issue* that shows Japanese diplomacy can achieve something when it sticks to its guns. Usually for Japan in relation to China and other countries, all the diplomatic cards tend to be held by our opponents. The whale negotiations are the only area where Japan can proactively take the initiative. We were battered ten years ago and beat up 20 years ago. Now we have reached this point. We can show that Japanese diplomacy is effective in whale-hunting negotiations."

Put in this context, the political energy expended on the campaign begins to make some sense: Japan can demonstrate its diplomatic chops and show it is not completely deferential in the foreign political arena, particularly to the US.

Whaling allows Japan to safely let off steam in the international arena, without any significant political risk. But that ignores the huge cost to Japanese taxpayers.

Vote Buying and the IWC

One of the most controversial elements of Japan's campaign to overturn the whaling ban is the alleged use of overseas development aid to 'buy' the votes of poorer countries, an allegation vehemently denied by fisheries officials. "We send overseas aid to over 160 countries, including many anti-whaling countries in the developed world," says Morishita Joji, the FA's director for international negotiations. "This is government money and is not connected to political issues."

Morishita Joji was Japan's chief whaling delegate to the IWC conference in St. Kitts, 2006. © David McNeill

So what explains the stunning transformation in the IWC balance of forces: from overwhelmingly conservationist (31–10) at the dawn of the moratorium in 1986 to this year's pro-whaling majority (32–33) at St. Kitts?

Many of the commission's 21 newest members, such as the Marshall Islands and St. Kitts & Nevis, have no history of whaling and several, including Mongolia and Mali, have no coastlines. All the newer members are developing countries and nearly half are from West Africa.

Leading pro-whaling lawmakers such as Hayashi flatly contradict the bureaucrats and acknowledge this power shift could clearly only have been achieved by a sustained campaign to recruit allies.

"I think most of the countries that have newly joined, including the Caribbean, African countries and Central American countries like Nicaragua have joined as the result of joint efforts by the pro-whaling camp. We cooperate and recruit new countries. You know, nobody joins without an invitation or lobbying (laughs). When the moratorium was passed we were less than one quarter so now we finally have a majority."

Hayashi and his fellow leaguers insisted for years that whaling is a matter of, in his words, 'important national interest' and should be shoved near the top of the list of conditions for ODA. Since 2002, they have worked closely with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) and the Prime Minister's Office to coordinate international whaling diplomacy.

Prime Minister Koizumi, for example, expressed his gratitude for support on whaling to the president of the Nicaragua, Enrique Bolanas Geyer, at a summit meeting in June 2004. One month later, Japan cancelled Nicaraguan debt to the tune of US$118.4 million. Japan's whaling diplomacy has been built on dozens of similar deals.

Accusations that rich countries, including Japan, tie ODA spending to its strategic interests are hardly new. As the refreshingly honest pro-whaling Australian journalist Padraic P. McGuinness puts it: "It is standard practice in world politics for wealthy countries to bribe poor countries."

But will this strategy succeed in winning Japan, Iceland and Norway the 75 percent IWC majority needed to overturn the moratorium? Oddly, the answer acknowledged by almost everyone involved, is that it will not.

"It is absolutely impossible [for Japan] to get 60 pro-whaling votes, and even if they persuade more allies, more anti-whaling countries will join the IWC," says Ishii Atsushi, a political science scholar at Tohoku University. Israel, for example, joined the pro-whaling side for the first time in St. Kitts, and there are many more countries where it came from: the more allies Tokyo recruits, the stronger the likely reaction from the conservationists.

Still, the diplomacy goes on. Japan's campaign to overturn the ban is tied closely to one specific category of aid—'Grant Aid for Fisheries and its related Technical Cooperation.' One estimate is that *three quarters of a billion dollars* in fisheries grant aid have been dispersed to Tokyo's new whaling allies between 1994 and 2005.

That does not exhaust Japan's largess. Landlocked Mongolia, for instance, has been the recipient of cultural grants and loan assistance. Japanese aid to Mongolia now accounts "for approximately one-third of total aid by foreign countries and international organizations," says the MOFA website. Who would feel safe speculating that such largess to one of the world's poorer countries has no impact on its official stance in international forums where Japan is a prominent presence?

Over the last decade, MOFA and other officials have also logged hundreds of trips abroad to discuss whaling issues with foreign diplomats, and hosted dozens of conferences at home. Estimating the total cost of wooing Japan's 21 whaling allies, and the ongoing effort to recruit more, is therefore clouded in mystery but runs into billions of yen.

Remarkably, in a climate of swinging public budget cuts, there is little apparent media interest in this expensive exercise in whaling diplomacy, despite the fact that it has no hope of success.

Even the FA's Nakamae concedes there is little chance of recruiting 60 countries: "Given the current situation with two sides operating at opposite ends, it will be terribly difficult to realize three-quarters of the IWC," he says. (Bear in mind here a useful rule-of-thumb in the world of bureaucracy: Yes means maybe; maybe means difficult; terribly difficult means impossible).

Pro-whalers hope that changing the composition of the IWC will swing the debate back toward sustainable whaling, says FA spokesman Moronuki Hideki. "We're hoping the atmosphere of the IWC will change drastically." The stage is set for a stalemate that could last for years and in the meantime, 'scientific whaling' goes on…

A Return to Managed Whaling?

The Japanese catcher ship Yushin Maru harpoons a whale in the Southern Ocean, January 7, 2006. © Greenpeace/ J. S. Hibbert

The whaling issue then is, in the words of one environmentalist, 'a mess.'

Inside Japan, the FA runs the show almost free of critical scrutiny by the media or the influence of other parts of the government (such as MOFA) that might take a less confrontational approach; lawmakers back them at zero political cost, and the miniscule whaling industry happily survives on subsidies.

Such is the strength of this unhappy compromise. Some wonder whether it cannot continue forever.

"Japan is not really serious about lifting the moratorium because the current situation is not bad for the pro-whalers," says Nagano University's Sato. "They are widely supported by the public, congressmen and industry."

The IWC is impotent, finely balanced between two warring sides suspended on a cushion of political hot air. For most IWC environmentalists, the loss of the whaling ban would spell disaster but oddly, they help to sustain the campaign by adding rhetorical fuel to the FA's arguments that the rest of the world 'doesn't understand' whaling culture.

"People in Japan are not really pro-whaling," says Ishii. "They're just anti-anti-whaling. They believe the FA when it says the world is stopping them eating whale." Just as there is no political capital to be made in Japan from opposing whaling, environmental groups—many kept afloat by fees from millions of anti-whaling supporters—have nothing to win by compromise.

Protests by Australia, New Zealand and Great Britain will not diminish the strength of pro-whaling feeling in Japan and may even add to it. Only the prospect of a strong anti-whaling campaign in America, it seems, might rattle the FA's confidence, one reason why environmentalists may concentrate their campaign for the humpback there next year.

Some conservationists then are beginning to ask, it time to call Japan's bluff? If the FA is determined to kill whales, let it, and test its claim that sustainable whaling is now possible. The agency has agreed to let international observers board its whaling ships to prevent over-fishing. "These are not sardines," says Nakamae. "They are big animals, relatively easy to monitor."

Ideally, such a compromise would be limited to Japan's exclusive 200-mile fishing zone but may have to concede limited high-seas whaling, in which case the IWC Revised Management Scheme—a "method of setting safe catch limits for certain stocks in areas where the numbers are plentiful"—would be crucial.

"The RMS is very well designed," says Sato. "It is one of the strictest, most advanced resource management systems, and it is very robust. This is the best system we have right now." And he adds: "If the moratorium is lifted they will find it hard to sustain the commercial industry and impossible to revive."

Conceding on commercial whaling would be a bitter pill to swallow for conservationists, who would in effect be gambling that it will take the steam out of Japan's campaign and expose the weaknesses of the whaling industry.

At its peak in the 1960s, the industry boasted eight fleets with 30–40 vessels producing more than 200,000 tons of meat annually; it now has one fleet of six boats. Although lawmaker Hayashi claims that '60 percent' of the Japanese population could again be persuaded to eat whale meat, most neutral observers believe that with the current figure at just one percent, this is wildly optimistic. Whale-meat will never be a mass-consumer product again.

Other dividends might follow. The Ministry of Health, known to be worried about the dangerous levels of PCB, mercury and dioxins in whale meat, would have more clout against the FA, as might MOFA, a reluctant partner at best in the whaling mission. And with the FA unable to claim that Western 'cultural imperialists' block their legitimate claims, one of the ideological pillars of the campaign collapses.

"The whole whaling issue is just a sort of parlor game in which petit nationalism flourishes," says Takeuchi Keiji, veteran science writer for the *Asahi* newspaper. "The Japanese side loves going to the IWC conferences. It's an excursion for them, like a boxing bout. And the environmentalists have been going for 20, 25 years. But there is no real discussion. They all love the debate, but this is a relatively minor problem and it should be easy to solve."

The Whaling Debate: The Experts Speak

"There are a number of factors, both biological and economic, which led the industry to destroy one whale species after another, even though the industry was dependent on their survival. Thus, the commercial whaling ban should be kept and not mixed up with the idea of preserving tradition and/or culture. More than 70 percent of the Japanese public don't support whaling in the Southern Ocean, but the Japanese government keeps sending its whaling fleet to do 'research.' This should stop."

—Sato Junichi, Greenpeace Japan Ocean Campaign Project Manager

Greenpeace activists harass Japan's whaling fleet in the Southern Ocean (undated). © Greenpeace/J. S. Hibbert

"We're not talking about hunting whales to extinction. We all know that whale resources were once over-used. But the idea of thinning out some stocks exists in

all other kinds of animals, ranging from deer to kangaroos. I wonder why people overreact to whales only. We used to eat as part of our tradition but it was banned because of external pressure. So we're forced to protect our tradition under the name of research hunting."

—Hamada Yasukazu, LDP lawmaker and leading member of the Whaling Parliamentary League

"As a way to familiarize children with whale meat, we are supplying elementary schools with whale meat. The meat comes from whales that were captured for research purposes and is sold at a lower price than the usual market rate. The schools then serve the whale in a variety of ways: as cutlets, hamburger steaks and as a fried dish. For many children, it is the first time they have eaten whale meat. They all say it is tasty."

—Hatanaka Hiroshi, Director General of the Institute of Cetacean Research.

"The fundamental root cause of the whaling issue in Japan is a kind of trauma or destroyed pride which is handed down through generations of bureaucrats. The trauma came from Japan being labeled a cruel country, and having eggs and paint thrown at it. To lift this trauma the bureaucrats really need for the moratorium to be lifted. They would see this as a victory for their own value system. It is not really a problem of reviving the whaling industry now; it is a problem of national pride, or at least government and bureaucratic pride. They basically need a symbolic victory."

—Sato Tetsu, Professor of Ecology and Environmental Sciences, Nagano University.

"Japan, Iceland and Norway are taking whales outside of the IWC. It is lucky it is just these three. We have no guarantee that other countries will engage in self-controlled, self-restrained fishing. It should be about sustainable management rather than arguments about different philosophical views of whales."

—Morishita Joji, Director for International Negotiations, Fisheries Agency.

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For an earlier McNeill report on whaling click here.

For an update on Japan's stranded whaler in the Antarctic click here.