



The Complex Drivers of Japanese Whaling Policy

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Debates about Japanese whaling revolve around the issues of animal welfare, science and cultures. However, the dynamics that shape whale hunting are much more complex.

Watching the voting patterns of the various Parties to the International Whaling Commission (IWC) a neutral observer would think that the world is equally split between a pro-conservation lobby and those who are vocally committed to the support of commercial whaling. Whaling advocates use this apparent polarity to claim the IWC is 'dysfunctional' and to call for parties to compromise in their opposition to whaling.

One of the leading proponents for whaling is the Japanese Government whose rhetoric on the issue could lead one to believe that whaling is a core part of the Japanese eternal zeitgeist.

To some, the issue of whaling can be reduced to an ongoing debate between animal welfare, science and cultures. However, the dynamics that shape the hunting of the great whales are much more complex. It can be argued that it is the combined interaction of both localized domestic Japanese politics, wider international strategic concerns and Japan's relationship with the US, which creates the real drivers of Japanese whaling policy.

In fact, the whales may have very little to do with it.

Political Resource (In)Security and the IWC Moratorium

As a net importer of both food and raw materials Japan has always been sensitive to resource security. In the face of the 1973 oil shocks Japan

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launched an independent and vigorous campaign of resource diplomacy. The seriousness by which Japan saw this issue is referenced in the 1981 Japanese Defence White Paper,

“ “...Among the possible threats to [Japan’s] safety and existence are the restrictions or suspensions of supplies of resources, energies and foodstuffs, as well as armed aggression”. ”

Whilst many in Japan had not eaten whale meat before the 1940s post-war US occupation authorities urged that whale meat be offered in classroom lunches nationwide as a cheap source of protein and on so doing, temporarily became part of ‘Japanese everyday life’.

Japan’s industrial whaling peaked in the early 1960s and then entered a steady decline as consumers switched to other meat products. It may well have ended altogether when the IWC enacted a moratorium on commercial whaling in 1982, but even before the zero catch quotas had come into force the Japanese Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, Moriyoishi Sato stated,

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“ “The government will do its utmost to find out ways to maintain the nation’s whaling in the form of research or other forms”. ”

Thus, Japan began a sustained programme of ‘resistance’ to the implementation of the moratorium, including launching a programme of ‘scientific’ permit whaling, ostensibly allowed for under Article VIII of the [International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling \(ICRW\)](#) and a programme of [recruiting allied states](#) through conditional aid.

Whilst the 1946 signing of the ICRW was an important jurisprudential step in establishing the principle of international regulation in both the high seas and national waters, since joining the IWC in 1951, Japan has actively sought to limit IWC jurisdiction. It has argued against IWC competency for small cetaceans and increasingly asserting its sovereignty within its 200-mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) over the accepted norms of IWC control of whaling in *‘all waters in which whaling is prosecuted’*

Despite multiple calls by the IWC for Japan to cease its whaling, Japan’s decades of so-called ‘scientific’ whaling in the Antarctic was only paused when it was ruled *‘not for the purposes of science’* by the [International Court of Justice \(ICJ\)](#) in its landmark 2014 ruling.

Japan’s reaction to the ICJ decision

Whilst many countries may well have ‘thrown in the towel’ on an industry that was now attracting international condemnation and [consuming significant government subsidies](#), Japan has sought to use the ICJ decision to bolster its domestic claims of foreign prejudice.

In late 2015, despite failing to obtain IWC or scientific support, Japan’s whaling fleet again sailed to the Antarctic [under a new permit \(NEWREP-A\)](#). At the same time, Japan signalled that it would not countenance any future challenges [withdrawing from the jurisdiction of the ICJ](#) with respect to ‘research on, or conservation, management or exploitation of, living resources of the sea’.

In one move, Japan not only removed itself from being challenged on whaling, but it [seized the opportunity](#) the incident gave it to [remove any future chance of challenges to its other fisheries activities](#) in the highest global court.

Japan’s ‘scientific-whaling’ programme may well also be about keeping its whaling infrastructure extant, stimulating its domestic market, and, importantly, maintaining pressure on the IWC. Japan’s creative interpretation of Article VIII special permit whaling may even be an ongoing strategy to stimulate international criticism that can feed the wider Japanese Government nationalistic rhetoric of western bias.

Japan’s use of ‘cheque-book’ diplomacy

Japan would not have felt confident at rejecting the jurisdiction of the ICJ unless it felt it remained under the protection of the USA ‘[permission umbrella](#)’ and that it had enough client states in the IWC. Japan has regularly been criticised for [buying the votes](#) of developing countries within the IWC, but this strategy has very different roots.

During the Cold War, US political intervention to counter perceived Soviet expansionist activities in the Pacific encouraged Japanese use of conditional aid. What had begun at the signing of the [US-Japan Security Treaty in 1951](#) has grown into a Japanese foreign policy that includes aid to ex-Soviet states such as Mongolia.

Japan developed an increasing politico-strategic rationale as an instrument of the [doctrine of 'comprehensive security'](#). Under Shintaro Abe, Japan's Foreign Ministry, was to find the necessary leadership and political will to embrace strategic aid openly as part of a forthright foreign policy posture. In 1987, Japanese Foreign Minister, Tadashi Kuranari, visited the South Pacific region, and articulated what became known as the [Kuranari Doctrine](#) that set out a [multidimensional approach to Japanese ODA and foreign policy](#).

In the same year as the IWC voted for the moratorium, the South Pacific Forum reacted to Japan trying to reorganize its fishing arrangements in light of the adoption of the United Nation's Convention on the Law of the Sea ([UNCLOS](#)) [stating that it, 'Deplores the increasing tendency of distant water fishing nations to link the grant of aid with the receipt of fisheries access...'](#)

The precedence of Japanese interests has [remained a constant feature of Japan's aid programme to the Pacific](#) with preferred bilateral negotiations allowing Japan to [exploit divisions](#) between states to maximise its bargaining power.

And not all Japanese ODA is equal when the Japanese Fisheries Ministry (JMAFF) is involved. Indeed, it may be a mistake to see the actions of Japanese Government departments as pursuing a holistic strategy. The domestic power of the whaling block within the Japanese Ministry of Fisheries should not be

underestimated. Studies suggest that the Fisheries Ministry has been the main beneficiary of an aggressive ODA policy, highlighting the fact that when trying to carry out an analysis of the motivations of Japan, analysis cannot be limited to trying to understand what is believed to be the strategic national goals of any one state actor.

Trapped in a 'domestic bubble' of concerns

Observers have pointed to the incestuous relationships between JMAFF and those who profit from whaling. It has been noted that the Institute of Cetacean Research (ICR), the 'quasi-governmental' body that carries out 'scientific' whaling, is funded by sales of whale meat and from direct subsidies, whilst the government relies on the 'independence' of the ICR to claim scientific legitimacy for its whaling. Some go so far as to argue that this relationship is so institutionalized that Japan was happy with the scientific whaling status quo.

Japanese academic analysis points to the policy of ageing whaling advocates amongst the Ministry of Fisheries 'retiring', after years of defending Japanese whaling interests at international fora, into the very fisheries conglomerates that financially benefit from Japan's continued whaling. This domestic 'bubble of concerns' makes Japan almost impervious to external pressures when it comes to ending whaling. Indeed, the inter-connections go even deeper. In 1976 in an attempt to consolidate and preserve the dying Japanese whaling industry Japan's current Prime Minister's own father, Fisheries Minister Shintaro Abe helped to establish the whaling company of Nihon Kyodo Hoge Co. Ltd.

Prime Minister Abe has modelled his political credo on that of his grandfather, Nobusuke Kishi, who championed resurgent post-war nationalism.

Abe is also a supporter of *Nippon Kaigi*, a nationalistic revisionist grouping within the Japanese Cabinet and Diet. Historical re-interpretation of historical events has long coloured Japan's relationships with its regional neighbours but this new nationalism is seeking to redefine and reinforce whaling as part of their narrative. The ruling Liberal Democratic Party wishing to shore up its rural political support, including that from fishing communities, has been careful to back the establishment whaling position making it difficult for anyone to publicly criticise whaling without being seen to criticise Japan itself.

Some concluding thoughts

Japan's whaling policy is thus a complex product of domestic political norms and an industry maintained by direct and indirect financial and political co-dependencies all nested within an increasing nationalistic narrative.

Whilst the primacy of Japan's early foreign policy was focused on securing access to scarce raw materials and achieving its re-acceptance into the global sphere after World War II, it has now grown into a foreign policy tool for achieving diplomatic objectives. What is of concern to policy makers as well as conservationists is the fact that these real and manufactured drivers of Japanese whaling policy can negatively affect regional and international policy at the highest levels.

The debate within the IWC is no longer just about protecting whales, and is increasingly becoming a testing ground for Japan to establish new international norms for the exploitation of marine species. The consequences of acquiescence to Japan's ambitions may well have major repercussions not only for marine conservation, but also for the way states perceive how international law can be circumvented to serve domestic minority interests.

Image credit: [White Welles/Wikimedia](#).

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