

The Japanese Barely Eat Whale. So Why Do They Keep Whaling?



After World War II shattered Japan's economy, food was scarce and meat especially so. So General Douglas MacArthur, who effectively ruled Japan during the post-war Allied occupation, decided the Japanese should get protein from the sea. In 1946, he authorized two military tankers to become giant whaling ships and helped usher in a new era of industrial whaling in Japan. A generation of Japanese children grew up eating whale meat in school lunches.

Ah, how the times have changed.

When Japan this week resumed hunting minke whales in defiance of an international moratorium, the country found itself now on the other side of the Americans—and Australians, and New Zealanders, and most of the world, really. The International Whaling Commission has banned commercial whale hunting since 1986, making an exception for scientific research. Japan obeys the letter, if not exactly spirit, of the ban by saying the 333 whales it plans to kill each year are purely for research.

(Iceland and Norway, on the other hand, object to the moratorium and continue to hunt whales commercially without using science as an excuse.)

Given how Japan has twisted itself into knots to justify its whaling and how much international flack it's getting, you might conclude whale meat is a hugely important part of Japanese cuisine. Nope. Small-scale whaling is traditional in some parts of Japan, but whale meat was only ever popular in the postwar period. So for older Japanese, "this is like nostalgia food," says Katarzyna Cwiertka, a Japanese studies professor and author of *Modern Japanese Cuisine: Food, Power and National Identity*.

For everyone else, though, whale meat is more of a curiosity. "I am among the kids who benefited from the cheap meat from the whales. My children have, however, no such experiences at all," says Kazuhiko Kobayashi, an agronomy professor and the co-author of *Japan's Dietary Transition and Its Impacts*. "This means that whale has lost its position among the animal meats, and will belong more to the category of curious foods for the predominant majority of Japanese."

Good numbers are hard to come by but A [2006 poll](#) commissioned by Greenpeace and conducted by the independent Nippon Research Centre found that 95 percent of Japanese people very rarely or never eat whale meat. And the amount of uneaten frozen whale meat stockpiled in Japan has [doubled to 4,600 tons](#) between 2002 and 2012.

Even Japan's former top whaling negotiator, Komatsu Masayuki, told me he had never tried whale meat before the whaling job. "I was kind of forcing myself to eat whales because I don't know the taste," he says. "And it was delicious. But I'm not crazy about eating whales." Masayuki, who worked for the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries until 2007, still condemns members of the International Whaling Commission for "imposing their wrong emotional view upon Japanese conduct."

So what's really behind resistance to the moratorium? From the Japanese perspective, banning whaling before banning the killing of other animals is a bit logically inconsistent. If your argument is about conservation, then bluefin tuna, a far more important part of the Japanese diet, is also far more endangered. (Minke whales, the species Japanese whalers hunt, aren't even close to endangered, though the IWC claims minke whale numbers have fallen in recent decades.)

If your argument is that hunting whales is cruel, so is factory farming. If your argument is that whales are smart, so are pigs. None of this amounts to a case *for* eating whales, of course, but the argument to single out whales for protection is not exactly airtight either.

So "saving the whale" may be irrational, but so is saving the panda or the polar bear or

any other cute mammal. Activism rides on symbolic actions. And just as the whale has become symbolic for environmental groups like Greenpeace, it has, in response, become symbolic for the Japanese, too. "The strong condemnation of whaling by the foreigners is taken as harassing the traditional values," says Kobayashi. The Japanese government now heavily subsidizes whaling to the tune of [\\$50 million](#) a year.

By and large though, adds Kobayashi, the typical Japanese attitude toward whaling as a political issue is ambivalent and whale meat as food is indifferent. Japan's plan to kill 333 whales year is already drastically down from the previous annual target of 1,000. Cwiertka also points out that most of the people in high levels of Japanese government are older men—men old enough to have grown up eating whale meat as schoolchildren. Whale meat is already on the decline, with or without international meddling.