

The Case, Prospect, and Underlying Issues of Commercial Whaling in Japan

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The Japanese government has moved out of the International Whaling Commission (hereafter IWC) in 2019 and resumed commercial whaling after 31 years. While they decided to leave the international organization and resume domestic whaling, many issues and challenges remain to be solved without much consensus between those who agree with commercial whaling and those who do not. For example, supporters of whaling insist there are abundant numbers of whales available for commercial whaling, and it is harmless to the marine environment when limited populations are caught. This opinion is based on a scientific standpoint, and many supporters use this kind of idea to strengthen their stance toward whaling. However, some people who disagree with whaling argue that whales are so special and intelligent that it is too cruel to kill them, even for consumption as nutritious food sources. Others claim that whaling is against morale. These opinions are based on ethics and values, which can be diverse depending on each culture and thus difficult to define.

The controversy over whaling has continued for many years due to the unsettling debate between the people from different standpoints. Moreover, there has not been any progress for solutions so far. This is because the issue itself has various problems, such as culture, science, value, policies and ethics. From a scientific point of view, whaling is surely sustainable under severe restrictions. Nevertheless, whaling is not justified merely by the scientific standpoint. Various cultural viewpoints, such as ethics and values, prevent whaling from being conducted. Some aggressive opponents, for instance, have attempted dangerous attacks to stop whaling research in the Antarctic Ocean. According to a document by Japan Fisheries Agency (2016), Sea Shepherd, an international marine conservation organization and also one of the most prominent anti-whaling groups based in the US, attacked a Japanese whaling ship, and some of the group's members threw bottles of acid multiple times in the past in the Antarctic Ocean. On other occasions, Japanese representatives in an IWC meeting were sprayed with red ink. Moreover, some members of the anti-whaling group even burnt the Japanese national flag while they were going on a demonstration. These violent actions indicate that scientific viewpoints alone would not contribute to a solution over whaling, and it is expected that the argument over whaling would be far from reaching an agreement because the government found it impossible to continue discussion in IWC meetings any longer and gave up finding consensus between the opponent countries.

In this paper, given the situation and controversy over whaling, the author discusses the issue in terms of domestic demands for the whaling industry. Instead of scientific research findings, cultural sentiment, or ethical perspectives, the focus on the demand helps understand the issue from more objective standpoints. In addition, the author suggests the supporters of whaling to critically rethink the actual needs of whaling in contrast to demands which will be pointed out in this paper.

Viewpoint on the history and consumption

Surrounded by the sea, Japanese islands were under suitable environments for whaling. People from ancient times have made efficient use of whales, not only for eating but also for several daily necessities. For instance, people in the Jomon period used whale bones and teeth for fine crafts, oils for soap and candles, and barbels for traditional dolls. In addition, according to a website of JWA (n.d.), documents show whales were regarded as the same creature as fish since the Asuka era, and whale meat had been treated as one of precious foods until the Edo era. Whale meat in the Edo era was certainly considered as an expensive food source, and only the rich and noble could afford to eat whale dishes. Also, given the number of shrines and mounds throughout Japan where whales are dedicated, it is clear that local people shared common images about the precious creature and felt familiar with whales. According to *Ikimono-kuyou hi Topic Maps* by Knowledge Synergy Inc (n.d.), there are 208 shrines and mounds in total that are dedicated to whales throughout Japan, especially in coastal areas in the western region. Some of them are still taken great care of by the locals and municipalities today.

Appendix A shows where these shrines and mounds are located in Japan. From the number of these historical spots, it is guessed that whaling was common for many coastal communities as a part of fishing since long years before. The map also indicates that building religious objects was common for the regions where whaling was practiced. Therefore, it is evident how local people have worshipped whales as sacred sea animals, treating the dead creature in the way they would for the deceased people, to show how grateful they felt for consuming whale meat.

In contrast, whale meat became more widely available, and regular people started eating whale meat in their daily lives in the postwar period. Even though commercial whaling in Japan had been suspended in the wartime, the government resumed whaling soon after the war ended. At that time, many people were suffering from a food shortage, and were dying because of severe hunger. Considering whale's various nutrition and availability, the government resumed whaling to save people's lives. In the video "Food Shortage & Antarctic Whaling" (JWA, 2020), an 1892 Asahi newspaper article is shown to explain how Douglas MacArthur GHQ of the American army

who played an important role in the world war II, allowed the government to conduct whaling then. Fishers throughout Japan gathered at local coasts and went on a whaling voyage together. As a result, the amount of consumption for whale meat sharply increased after the war. According to statistics by JFA (2021), domestic consumption for whale meat reached 23,3000 tons in 1962, which is the largest number since the record started in 1960. Appendix B shows how much whale meat Japanese people in the postwar period had been eating. This number indicates that approximately 2,45kg of whale meat per person on average was consumed in 1962. It also indicates that people in the postwar period ate more whale meat than beef, pork and chicken combined for several years. This data proves that people after the wartime heavily relied on whale meat for their survival.

However, demands for commercial whaling today remain very low. This is due to a moratorium on whaling which is aimed at preserving whale populations so that they do not go extinct. In the background, the whale population seriously declined because of overhunting. While countries such as the US, the UK and Japan used to actively conduct whaling in the beginning of 1900's, there was a concern that whales may go extinct at this rate in the future. After that, some restrictions over the number of whales available to catch were imposed, and the moratorium went into effect in 1982. After a few years, the Japanese government started whaling for a research purpose in the Antarctic Ocean in 1987, and completely stopped commercial whaling in the next year.

Although the moratorium and scientific research helped the number of whales return to an almost natural level, it would be unrealistic for the Japanese today to eat whale meat to the level they did in the postwar period. For instance, according to the statistics by JFA (2021), the average amount of domestic consumption for whale meat between 2009 and 2018 was 3,500t, in contrast to the average amount between 1960 and 1969 was 18,2000t (See Appendix C for details). This amount means the Japanese today consumes as little as 1.9% of whale meat compared to the amount of consumption in the 1960's. In addition, according to an online article by CNN (2019), the mass consumption of whale meat that Japanese people ate in 2017 was no more than 3000t, which is as small as two tablespoons per person.

Now that the government decided to move out of IWC, and resume commercial whaling within its territorial waters by themselves, given the facts that the number of whales available for whaling is limited for sustainable use and that the price of whale meat remains high for the past several years, conducting commercial whaling in Japan may be less important. According to an online article by SANKEI BIZ (2020), the maximum number of whales which are available for

commercial whaling in 2020 is 383. This number consists about 60% of the number in 2018, whose purpose was for research. In short, even though the government resumed whaling, the actual number hunted has not been sufficient enough to meet worker's demands who engage in the whaling industry. Furthermore, it is expected that the consumption of whale meat in restaurants and at home will be smaller in the future unless the prices go down to a reasonable level, especially because the pandemic of COVID-19 prevents people from buying and consuming all together.

Viewpoint on regional cultures

This part focuses on two local regions that have deep connections with whaling for years, and how local people have treated whales in each community.

Case 1: Taiji Town, Wakayama Pref.

Taiji Town is a small town located in the southeast part of Wakayama Prefecture, with a population of 2,800 people. Over half of the region is faced with sea, and the rest of the region is surrounded by cliffs and steep mountains, which are not so suitable for agriculture. Also, the town was so far from a major city in the prefecture, which is located in the northeast part, that local people in Taiji needed to lead a self-sufficient lifestyle. However, according to Taiji City (n.d.), since offshore areas of Taiji City were where northern and southern sea currents get mixed, people were able to catch weak whales which came closer to the shore. These geographical factors led local people to start whaling from ancient times.

According to the Association for the Preservation of the Kumano Sea Whaling Culture. (n.d.), since long years ago, whales were regarded as "Ebisu", religious god who brings great wealth from the sea. People caught whales that came on the beach, and believed that whales lead them to better lives. After that, in the Edo era, Yorimoto Wada, a local samurai, conducted whaling with descendants of local soldiers. It is generally said that he is the first person in Japanese history that began whaling at an organizational level. Whaling at that time required more than 500 fishers throughout the town, which means whaling was one of the primary industries for the local residents. In addition, according to the same website (Association for the Preservation of the Kumano Sea Whaling Culture, n.d.), it is written in *Nihon Eitai Gura*, a historical report by Saikaku Ihara, a Japanese haiku poet in the Edo era, that whaling business brought prosperity to the whole region. Whaling was certainly connected with people in the region in the Edo era, and helped the community overall vitalize for many years in the past.

These days, even though the scale of the whaling industry has gotten smaller than in the

past, some local regions have been struggling to sustain their original whaling cultures and appeal to tourists for sightseeing. For instance, whaling in Taiji used to be one of the major industries for the town. In recent years, however, due to the moratorium of whaling and aging society, the scale of industry has downsized significantly. Nonetheless, people in the town of Taiji are hoping to revitalize their community through succeeding whaling cultures to the next generations. According to an article by NIKKEI (2019), Kazutaka Minori, a mayor of the town, has this to say;

“I sincerely feel pleasure that commercial whaling has been resumed. I would like to strengthen international and regional connections so that more and more people can appreciate the value of whales in the future.”

There are museums, monuments, shrines and historical spots for whales in the town. In addition, traditional festivals such as Taiji-ura kujira festival and events concerning whales are held every year in that region. Still today, though the whaling industry has been downsized over the years, many people in the region have pride in their original culture and tradition about whales, and it seems they represent the town's local identity.

Case 2: Nagato City, Yamaguchi Pref.

Nagato City is located in the northeast part of Yamaguchi prefecture, with a population of 34,000 people. Unlike Shimonoseki City in the same prefecture, which provided whaling fishers with funds and resources, fishers in Nagato actively conducted whaling only with the help of merchants in Shimonoseki. They conducted whaling at a large scale in the Edo period. Since a group of whales went south and passed its offshore area between fall and winter, people at the time made use of those natural resources. According to the information on “Kujira Map” (Whale Map) created by Shimonoseki City (2020), about 2,800 whales were caught for about 200 years from 1698 to 1910, when whaling was conducted actively throughout the city.

It is clear that whaling has contributed to shaping the unique culture of the city. For example, at the time whaling was common in the city, they sometimes caught mother whales with babies by mistake, and this led people to feel a great deal of sympathy and sadness towards them. According to the “Kujira Map”, a Buddhist monk built a small altar and started praying for the dead whales in the Edo era. In addition, a grave for whales was built, and people buried whale bones and ashes in the back of it. Also, each of the whales was given a Buddhist name and was listed in a divine notebook. Considering Buddhist names are divine names which are given to the dead, and is usually only for the human being, it can be said that whales are treated with much respect.

These customs are handed over to the next generation as a local culture. Today, a festival,

where people show gratitude for whales for bringing prosperity to the region, is held every year. The city is also known for the birthplace of Misuzu Kaneko, one of Japanese famous poets in history. Some say that the origin of her works is closely related to the local whaling culture. Also, according to an article by Ashida (2010), the local people feel great gratitude for whales, give their hands to each other when in trouble, and pass their tradition on in their daily lives. These religious practices and people's attitude toward whaling indicate that they have a good understanding of the importance of whales and they reflect that value into their daily lives.

Results from the questionnaire

The final part of this paper focuses on the results and findings of the online questionnaire which was conducted by the author. The purpose of this online survey was to see what images people have for whales and whaling, and to see if people are for or against whaling activities. It was conducted from December 7th to 14th in 2020, with 28 respondents in total through a group chat in LINE, Google Classrooms and Facebook. The survey used Google Forms with 8 multiple choice questions and 1 open-ended question about commercial whaling in Japan. There are three main findings from the result of the survey.

The first is that most of the respondents do not have correct knowledge about whales, especially in terms of facts such as population. According to the result, around 70% of the respondents thought that whales are at risk of extinction today, which is actually wrong. There used to be overhunting of whales in the past, but most species have already recovered their population to the level before whaling started, according to a thesis by a professor in Tokyo University of Marine Science and Technology (Morishita, 2018). It shows that whales are not in danger of extinction today. Also, according to the result, about 80% of those who think whales are in danger of extinction say that they disagree with whaling. From these results, it is clear that many people today regard whales as endangered animals, and this seems to be the main reason to disagree with whaling.

Secondly, very few people have had whale dishes in their lives and thus these dishes can be regarded as rare foods rather than common dishes today. According to the result, about 80% of those who have eaten any whale dish answered that they've eaten it only once or a few times. This result shows that whale dishes are not eaten commonly in the daily lives of people, and it is guessed that these dishes were only seasonal, regional, or occasional. Since people today have limited occasions of eating these dishes, demand for whale meat remains small, and it would be difficult for whaling to gain popularity even in Japan in the future.

Finally, many people do not feel the demand for commercial whaling. According to the result, around 70% of respondents expressed that they disagree with whaling, and only 3% agree with it. This result seems to be in contrast to the government's idea that they are going to actively promote whaling. The demand for whaling is regarded as less important, even among those who support whaling. For instance, according to a web site of JWA (n.d.), most public polls on Japanese commercial whaling on the website are very old, and a part of them reflects data from more than 20 years ago. Since there have been so many changes in society in recent years, such as Japanese withdrawal from IWC in 2019, changes in diet, and the recent pandemic of COVID-19, that public polls on commercial whaling should be conducted again to reflect the low demand for whale meat among people. Moreover, the result from 20 years ago should not be the reason to promote whaling activities in Japan. There remains a concern that the general public would feel uncertain about the future of the domestic whaling issues without these polls to be conducted and the information to be updated.

Conclusion

So far, the demand for whaling has been discussed in terms of historical change, relationship between regions and whaling, and the public survey about whaling. Based on these viewpoints, in this part, I would like to state the following points as a conclusion.

First point is that there is no need to conduct whaling at a national level today. There was a huge demand for whale meat in Japan in the past, and there is no question about this. However, the demand has been lowered because of the introduction of more productive and nutritious food sources and the changes in people's diet. Recently the economic impact of COVID-19 on many aspects of Japanese society, economy, including the fishing industry, is inevitable. It indicates that the scale of whaling, which was conducted efficiently at a national level in the past, does not necessarily apply to today's whaling industry under these circumstances. Therefore, there is no need to conduct whaling at a national level.

Secondly, there is a serious shortage of surveys about commercial whaling among people in Japan. Results from the questionnaire and research on whaling culture indicates that there is a gap between the demand of whaling and how people see whales, depending on regions. However, it was not clear throughout this research if people in the areas where whaling was conducted in the past, are really in need of whale meat and whaling itself even today. In contrast, the government is trying to conduct whaling at a national level. In this way, the gap would make it difficult to conduct whaling efficiently. Thus, it is essential to gather updated data about the need of whaling in Japan

as well as research on the number of whales available to make use of, so that whaling can be conducted under proper balance between demand and supply.

Finally, whales are also special in a sense for those who support whaling. It is not the case, as pointed out by the international organizations, that people who support whaling are treating the animal with cruelty and disrespect. In some regions where whaling was conducted in daily lives, it is common to worship whales in a festival and religious events even today. The custom is also reflected in regional cultures in ways that people give their hands to each other when they are in trouble, as whaling is a large part of local identity that helps people bond and work in teams. Furthermore, a famous local poet wrote a series of poems related to whales, appreciating the animal and nature. In that sense, whales are seen as a part of nature, which influences local communities and helps them shape their original cultures to live with nature and treat it with great respect. Yet, it is 2021, the respect for nature, animal rights, and environmental consciousness has to take different forms that are more globally accepted and understood.

Still, issues over whaling remain controversial not only at a worldwide level but also at a national level. However, it is more important to critically evaluate the need for whaling in Japan than talking about problems related to ethics and values, which are difficult to define. In any case, there can be hope that Japanese whaling will be conducted under proper balance of demand and supply with more up-to-date data on consumers throughout the nation.

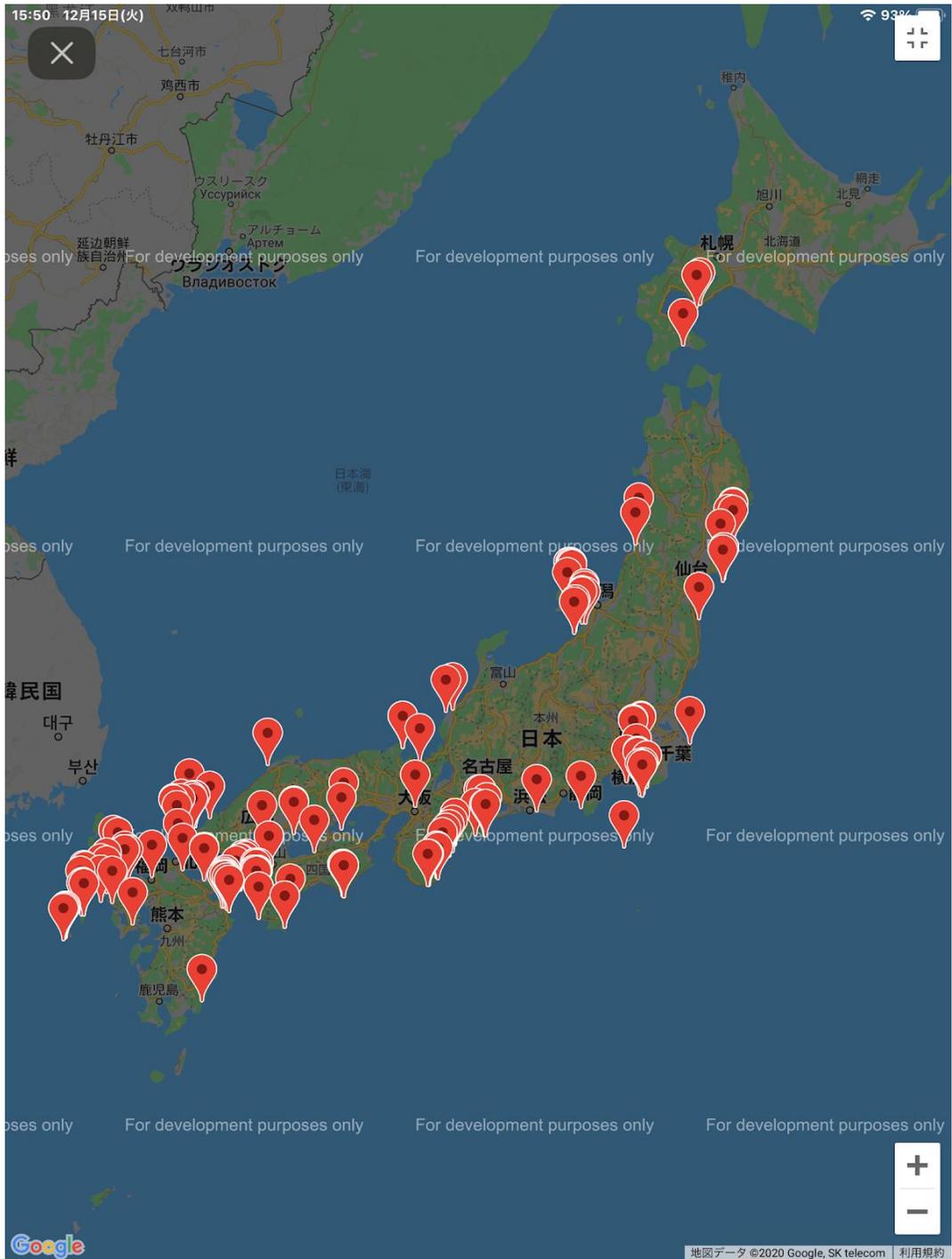
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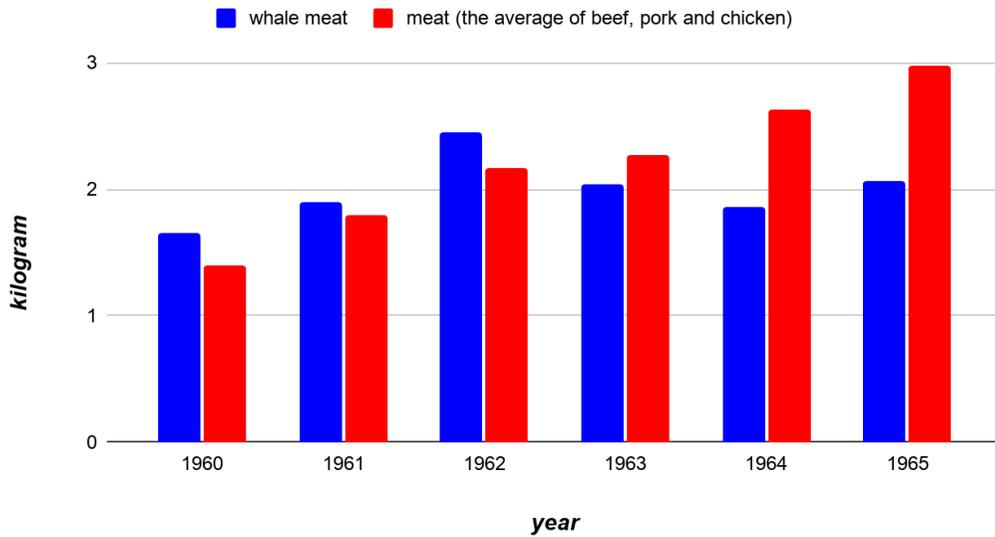
Appendix A



Data from <http://tmap1.topicmaps-space.jp/kuyo/instance.jsp?id=target-100055>

Appendix B

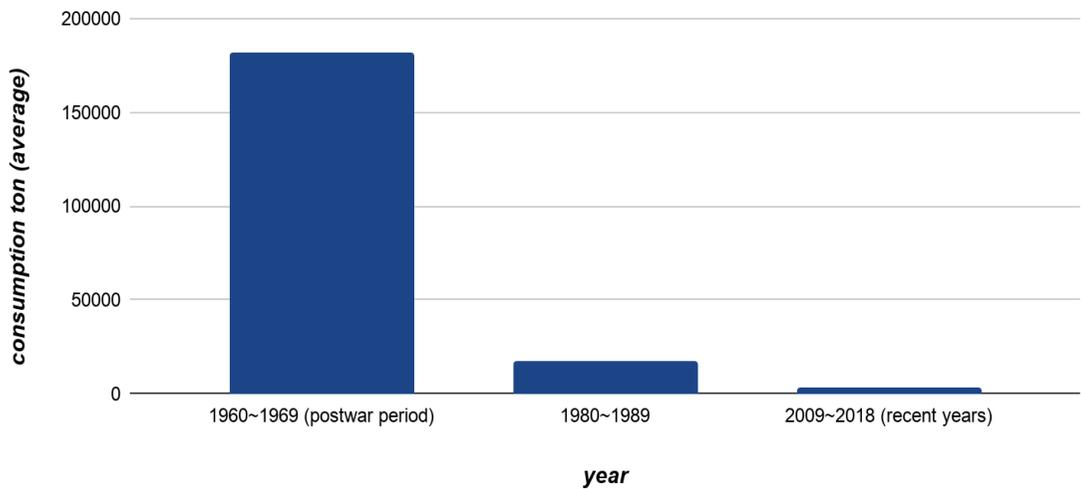
Comparison for the average consumption per one person



data from <https://www.maff.go.jp/j/zyukyu/fbs/>

Appendix C

Comparison for the domestic consumption of whale meat



data from <https://www.maff.go.jp/j/zyukyu/fbs/>