

Japan Loses Its Appetite for Whale Meat

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TOKYO (AP) — The greatest threat to Japan's whaling industry may not be the environmentalists harassing its ships or the countries demanding its abolishment, but Japanese consumers. They've lost their appetite.

The amount of whale meat stockpiled for lack of buyers has nearly doubled over 10 years, even as anti-whaling protests helped drive catches to record lows. More than 2,300 minke whales worth of meat is sitting in freezers, while whalers still plan to catch another 1,300 whales per year.

Low demand adds to the uncertainty that looms ahead of an International Court of Justice ruling expected Monday on Japan's whaling in the Antarctic Ocean. The whaling is ostensibly for research, but Australia argued in a lawsuit that it's a cover for commercial hunts.

The stated goal of the research, which began in 1987, is to show that commercial whaling is environmentally sustainable, but a growing question is whether it is economically sustainable. Japan's government-subsidized whaling program is sinking deeper into debt and faces an imminent, costly renovation of its 27-year-old mother ship, Nisshin Maru.

"A resumption of commercial whaling is not a realistic option anymore, and the goal has become a mere excuse to continue research hunts," said Ayako Okubo, marine science researcher at Tokai University. "The program is used for the vested interests."

The research program began a year after an international ban on commercial hunting took effect. Japan is one of a few countries, including Norway and Iceland, which continue to hunt whales despite the moratorium. Activists from the group Sea Shepherd try to block the whalers by dragging ropes in the water to damage their propellers, and by lobbing smoke bombs at the ships, and through other methods.

Whale meat not used for study is sold as food in Japan. But according to Fisheries Agency statistics, the amount of whale meat stockpiled in freezers at major Japanese ports totaled about 4,600 tons at the end of 2012, from less than 2,500 tons in 2002.

A Fisheries Agency official conceded that Sea Shepherd's efforts to harass whaling ships have kept the stockpile from growing even bigger. He spoke on condition of anonymity because he is not authorized to speak to the media.

Whale meat supplied half of Japan's protein needs 50 years ago, but today it's limited to specialty restaurants and school lunches in most of the country. It is a bigger part of the local diet in several coastal whaling towns that are allowed to

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conduct small-scale coastal whaling outside of International Whaling Commission oversight.

The number of whale meat distributors and processors declined by half between 1999 and 2012, according to industry statistics. Distributors have said whale meat is unpopular largely because of the high price, lack of recipe varieties and negative image.

Once a cheaper substitute for beef, it's now about the same price. Whale bacon is sold as a delicacy, priced about 2,000 yen per 100 grams (\$90 per pound), several times the cost of regular bacon.

The Institute of Cetacean Research, a nonprofit entity overseen by the government that runs the program, made 2 billion yen (\$20 million) from the whale meat sales last year, down from more than 7 billion yen (\$70 million) in 2004, according to a financial report viewed by The Associated Press.

The institute rejected repeated requests by the AP for comment on whaling and its future, citing concerns about possible repercussions and violence by the Sea Shepherd on the Japanese whalers. The five-ship fleet is expected to return home within weeks, though the institute would not give any details. Its website is filled with press releases related to Sea Shepherd instead of its research.

Initially, the government injected about 500 million yen (\$5 million) a year into the program, or about 10 percent of its costs. By 2007, the subsidy had grown to about 900 million yen (\$9 million), and is projected to exceed 5 billion yen (\$50 million) for the current fiscal year ending in September. That includes money for anti-Sea Shepherd measures, such as repairs for damage and dispatch of a patrol ship.

In 2011, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries used an earthquake and tsunami disaster reconstruction fund to help cover whaling debts. The ministry later acknowledged funneling 2.3 billion yen (\$23 million) of the fund into whaling, triggering public outcry. The whaling subsidy, now part of a broader package of fisheries issues, will expire next year.

Okubo, the marine researcher, says the research has been a comfortable option for Japan to keep the embattled industry alive without taking drastic restructuring needed if they are serious about going commercial again. The research has justified subsidies, kept jobs for whalers and allowed Japan to catch up to the ambitious catch quota. The industry at its peak in the 1960 had more than 10,000 crewmembers and fishermen, but that number has dropped to fewer than 200, plus a small number of coastal whalers.

The only commercial whaling operator still operating in Japan is Kyodo Sempaku Kaisha, which is affiliated with the Institute of Cetacean Research and manages whaling ships and meat sales.

Monday's ICJ ruling in the Hague could cost Japan the roughly 1,000 whales it takes in the Antarctic each year, or its catch quota could be reduced. Other Japanese

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whaling in the North Pacific and off the Japanese coast will not be affected.

Masayuki Komatsu, a former Fisheries Agency official who served as a Japanese negotiator at IWC annual meetings, says Antarctic whaling is legal under international rules.

"What's at stake is not just whales. It's a matter of territorial rights, in a way," said Komatsu, now a fisheries professor at the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies. "The Antarctic is an open sea that everyone is entitled to its rich resources. There is no need to concede to nationalistic confrontation."

But a 2011 report by a Fisheries Agency panel of outside experts recommended scaling back or terminating the Antarctic hunts, suggesting that coastal whaling could be enough for Japan's tiny appetite for whale meat. It was supposed to be an interim report, but no final report was ever published.

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