

OPINION:

Japan's Whaling Industry a Bureaucratic Power Game

Aurelia George Mulgan 24 December 2007

The diplomatic offensive by Australia and more than 30 other nations was successful in persuading the Japanese Government to abandon its plan to catch 50 humpback whales in the Southern Ocean this summer. But the main battle is yet to be fought and may prove unwinnable.

Action against Japan by anti-whaling nations including Australia has little or no chance of halting the Japanese whaling program. Not because the Japanese government cannot stop it, but because it does not want to.

Chief government spokesperson Nobutaka Machimura said in late November after Japan's whaling fleet set out for Antarctic waters that Japan could not just stop. But the Japanese government is in a better position to stop whaling than it is to call a halt to any other industry in Japan.

Whaling is a government sponsored industry. It falls under the jurisdiction of the Fisheries Agency of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry & Fisheries. The agency sets the price of whale meat and provides subsidies to the affiliated organization that commissions research whaling, the Institute of Cetacean Research. The institute charters vessels and crews from a privately owned fisheries company, Kyodo Senpaku, which depends totally on the Government for work in conducting whaling and in inspecting Japanese fishing fleets.

Officials from the Fisheries Agency are the public face of Japanese whaling at the International Whaling Commission, where they repeatedly and aggressively put the case for a resumption of commercial whaling. Minke whales are nothing but cockroaches of the ocean, according to one of these officials, Masayuki Komatsu.

The institute maintains a website that rails against illegal harassment and terrorism against institute research and which accuses Australian scientists of missing the point – again about Japanese research whaling.

The Fisheries Agency is the body that admitted under-reporting its catch of southern bluefin tuna to the Commission for the Conservation of Southern Bluefin Tuna in 2007. It fears that stopping whaling would be the thin end of the wedge in the imposition of a stronger regulatory environment for Japanese ocean fishing activities.

Far from considering an abandonment of the Japanese whaling program, it has big plans to expand it. In fact, the whole purpose of scientific whaling, according to the institute's director-general, Minoru Morimoto, is to ensure that any future commercial whaling regime is robust and sustainable to provide a reliable food source for generations to come. In short, research whaling is simply a precursor to the resumption of commercial whaling.

The fisheries Agency also blocks the diffusion of anti-whaling positions in Japan, according to a Japanese researcher at the University of California, Keiko Hirata. It does this through its strong advocacy of the counter-vailing position that Japan is a whale-eating culture.

But cultural tradition must be weak, given the low consumer demand for the product. Stockpiles are rising, with reports of some of the surplus being diverted to schools, hospitals, family-friendly restaurants and dog-food manufacturers.

Australian politicians have pointed out that Japan's scientific whaling is a sham and simply thinly-disguised commercial whaling. The irony is that the commercial whaling in Japan would not be viable because of poor market prospects.

Cultural tradition is not the real reason Japan undertakes whaling. Whaling is an industry run by bureaucrats for bureaucrats. The political power and budget of the fisheries bureaucracy is integrally bound up with the continuation and expansion of the whaling industry. Without government sponsorship, the Japanese whaling industry would not survive.

Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which has to deal with the diplomatic fall-out from whaling, exerts no power over the fisheries bureaucracy. Decision making on whaling is almost entirely in the hands of the Fisheries Agency. It is the quintessential example of unconstrained bureaucratic power in Japan. Not even the Japanese Prime Minister exercises sufficient power to rein in the fisheries bureaucracy. Bureaucratic power in Japan can only be curbed by politicians who mobilise strongly on policies that carry weight in terms of votes. There are no votes in whaling in Japan – either for or against. Without public pressure to halt the industry, the anti-whaling cause has no political traction.

Most Australians find the killing of whales repugnant. Most Japanese do not. For them whales are just another kind of fish protein, although not a particularly palatable one. The anti-whaling lobby in Japan struggles for funds and influence. Greenpeace Japan has made little headway in its anti-whaling campaign. In fact, the attempt to impose anti-whaling norms on Japan is typified as a kind of cultural imperialism from the West.

Regardless of the rights and wrongs of its position, Japan should worry about the diplomatic costs of its whaling program. Whaling does more damage to Japan's international image than any other single issue. It is losing international good-will and endangering relations with some of its most important trading partners.

In the early 1980's, the Japanese government halted commercial whaling under threat of economic sanctions from the United States.

The Rudd government had invested no political capital in the proposed free trade agreement with Japan, an initiative of the Howard government. Terminating these negotiations would send a much stronger signal to Japan than diplomatic representations, shadowing Japanese whaling ships and international legal action.

Should the Australian government play this card, however, no-one would be celebrating more loudly than the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry & Fisheries, which opposes any concessions on agricultural market access.

Professor Aurelia George Mulgan is at the Australian Defence Force Academy, University of NSW. This article appeared in the Canberra Times on 24 December 2007.