

Future of commercial whaling ban rests with Japan

June 18 2010, By JAY ALABASTER , Associated Press Writer



In this March 12, 2010 file photo, a Metropolitan Police Department boat, foreground, escorts the Japan's government-backed research whaling vessel Shonan Maru No. 2 on the way to Harumi pier in Tokyo, carrying anti-whaling activist Pete Bethune, captain of the Sea Shepherd vessel Ady Gil, on board shortly before Japan's coast guard arrested the New Zealander for illegally boarding the Japanese ship in February. Japan is considering withdrawing from the International Whaling Commission if no progress is made toward easing an international ban on commercial whaling, its fisheries minister said Tuesday, June 15, 2010. (AP Photo/Itsuo Inouye, File)

(AP) -- A quarter-century ban on commercial whaling - one of the world's most successful preservation agreements - could crumble altogether if conservationists cannot persuade Japan to cut back on the tradition it champions.

Delegates to next week's meeting of the International Whaling Commission in Morocco will consider whether to allow limited commercial hunts if Tokyo stops pursuing [whales](#) in a southern sanctuary. Even adamant opponents are willing to sanction limited hunts on that condition, but it appears to be more than the Japanese are willing to concede.

"Japan holds the key, because Japan is the only country that is whaling in the southern ocean, the only country whaling in the sanctuary, the only country doing high-seas, long-distance whaling," said Susan Lieberman, Director of International Policy at the Pew Environment Group, which supports allowing some whaling.

At stake is the future of the IWC, the world's sole whaling regulator. After whaling devastated many species, the commission instituted a ban in 1986, but Japan, Norway and Iceland harvest animals annually under its various exceptions.

"The moratorium has been one of the single most effective conservation achievements of the century, but it's not working currently in the sense that several governments can whale completely outside the IWC's control," said Wendy Elliott, who will lead a group from the WWF at the meeting.

The frigid Antarctic has become the focus of the heated debate. The area was declared a sanctuary in 1994, but Japan hunts there under a scientific exemption. Norway and Iceland conduct much smaller hunts near their own coasts, fueling less anger from opponents.

Each year in the Antarctic, Japan's whalers clash among the ice floes with militant anti-whaling group Sea Shepherd. On the hunt this year, the [Sea Shepherd](#) lost a catamaran in a collision and one member was arrested when he boarded a Japanese whaler at sea.

Antarctic whaling has also boiled over into diplomatic channels. Australia is taking Japan to the International Court of Justice, and the U.S. plus a host of other countries have come out against the Antarctic hunts.

Japan maintains more scientific analysis is required in the region. It mostly catches Antarctic minke [whales](#), aiming for about a thousand per year but often catching far less due to protesters.

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature's Red List, a neutral listing of animal populations worldwide, says there is not enough data to determine if the species is threatened or not, although the population is "clearly in the hundreds of thousands."

Agreement within the IWC appears agonizingly close. Since a proposal was floated in April by the IWC chairman, some from the anti-whaling side, including the U.S. delegation, Greenpeace, the WWF and the Pew Group have said they would consider voting to allow limited hunts, and Japan has signaled it may accept taking less whales than it does now.

But in the days leading up to the conference that begins Monday, the sticking point remains the southern sanctuary. Any agreement will be voted on by the full 88 member countries, with the goal to reach complete consensus and eliminate all whaling under objections and exceptions.

Two whaling officials at Japan's powerful Fisheries Agency, which sets the national agenda on whaling issues, said the country will not give up its Antarctic hunts, with one calling them "crucial." Both asked to remain anonymous because they weren't authorized to speak publicly.

Makoto Ito, managing director of Kyodo Senpaku Co., the company that runs the annual Antarctic hunt, said he didn't think they should be ended,

because "we need to collect more data."

Japan's refusal to give up its Antarctic hunt puzzles even observers within the country. Current coastal catches, also conducted for scientific research, provide fresher meat and are cheaper. IWC approval would allow whalers to switch to commercial hunts and chase bigger whales, as well as shield Japan from international criticism.

Even if research proved the hunted whale populations were sustainable in the southern region, whether anyone would conduct such hunts is doubtful, making the purpose of the current scientific trips hard to understand, says Ayako Okubo, a researcher at Tokyo University.

"Truthfully, private companies would not go whaling in the Atlantic, if it weren't for the research hunts," she said.

But bureaucrats at the Fisheries Agency feel they are defending Japan's sovereign rights and food tradition, and have linked the issue with national pride. Many within Japan feel making any concessions on whaling is giving in to foreign pressure, said Jun Morikawa, a professor at Rakuno Gakuen University in northern Hokkaido.

"Nationalism is a double-edged sword. National sentiment has been activated now. But do you think the Fisheries Agency could pull out, even if it wanted to?" he said.

With whalers and conservationists unable to bridge the gap over Antarctica, it appears another IWC meeting will pass without a deal.

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