

New whale and dolphin watching body launches in Japan

June 4 2014



Anti-dolphin slaughter protesters rally in front of the Japanese embassy in Manila on September 2, 2013

Campaigners Wednesday welcomed the launch of a body promoting whale and dolphin watching in Japan, which they said could help the country move away from its controversial slaughter of the mammals.

Operators in Japan, who are based across the country from Hokkaido in the north, to Okinawa in the semi-tropical far south, gathered in Tokyo

for the first meeting of the Japan Whale Dolphin Watching Council.

"There are more than 200 whale and dolphin watching operators... engaged in this rapidly growing eco-tourism industry around coastal Japan. It's a positive alternative for coastal communities," said Patrick Ramage, programme director for [whales](#) at the International Fund for Animal Welfare.

Among those gathered was Kazunobu Kogi from Mikurajima island, who said around 9,000 tourists every year come to swim with dolphins, bringing much-needed cash to the spot which lies around 200 kilometres (125 miles) south of Tokyo.

"The economic benefits are much more widespread than the meagre funds associated with whaling, which is actually an activity heavily subsidised by the government. It doesn't pay its own way any more," said Ramage.

Japan, a member of the International Whaling Commission (IWC), has for years hunted whales under a loophole allowing for lethal research, despite worldwide criticism.

It has always maintained that it was intending to prove the [whale population](#) was large enough to sustain commercial hunting. But it never hid the fact that the by-product of [whale meat](#) made its way onto menus.

Japan's whaling was dealt a major blow this year when a United Nations court said its Antarctic mission was a commercial hunt masquerading as research. Tokyo pledged to redesign the scheme to fulfil more scientific criteria.

An annual cull of dolphins in a cove in the small town of Taiji generates a large amount of criticism and negative publicity for Japan, with

pictures of the blood spilt in the name of tradition causing revulsion around the world.

Ramage said the new initiative, which he said had come from local operators but was supported by international groups, offered a possible breakthrough in the lingering controversy and could give whaling communities a workable alternative.

"I think it's a very positive pro-whale, pro-Japan and pro-coastal economic development agenda," he said.

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