

'Stinky whale' whiff wafts over whaling talks

October 26 2016, by Mari ette Le Roux



The IWC was asked to instruct its scientific committee to investigate the origins of the foulness in grey whales

Between explosive diplomatic quarrels and pressing animal welfare concerns, world whaling talks came up against an unusual challenge this week, that of "stinky whales".

Experts and concerned parties wryly concede the problem is "weird", but are quick to point out that for the people of Chukotka in Russia's Far East, it is no laughing matter.

The Chukchi community relies on gray whale meat for their survival.

The problem is that in recent years some [gray whales](#) have developed a distinct chemical whiff that renders them inedible.

"Even the dogs don't eat this meat," Valentin Ilyashenko, Russia's deputy commissioner to the International Whaling Commission (IWC), told AFP at a commission meeting in Portoroz, Slovenia, on Wednesday.

Russia asked the commission for a provision by which "stinky whales" can be excluded from the indigenous Chukchi people's annual count of landed whales.

The Chukchi receive a quota from the IWC for hunting gray whales, of which they landed 124 in 2014, according to IWC records.

On average, about two or three "stinky whales" are landed per year, said Ilyashenko—one year there were ten in all.

"It has a medical smell, like iodine," he explained. "When you enter a pharmacy for example, but it's of course stronger. Unnatural."

Sometimes the meat does not smell immediately, but only once it is boiled.

Nobody knows why

"The result of consumption of stinky whale meat is loss of feeling in the mouth, allergies and diarrhoea. But that doesn't happen to everyone," the Russian envoy said.

According to Caterina Fortuna, chairwoman of the IWC's [scientific committee](#): "honestly, nobody knows exactly why (it's happening)".

"It seems clearly to be a chemical problem, but nobody knows what kind of... compound causes this odour," she said.



In recent years, grey whales have developed a distinct chemical smell, earning them the name, "stinky whale" and according to a Russian envoy, the result of the meat consumption is "loss of feeling in the mouth, allergies and diarrhea"

Gray whales are listed as a species of "least concern" by the International Union for Conservation of Nature, which keeps a "Red List" of animals at threat.

Like all whales, the species is protected under a 30-year-old IWC moratorium on all but aboriginal subsistence and scientific hunts.

Numbers have largely recovered after severe depletion by hunters in the 20th century.

The Chukchi may take up to 140 gray whales, which can grow to 15 metres (50 feet) and weigh as much as 35 tonnes, every year.

"The Russian Federation (has) a problem because these whales which stink, they are inedible," said Fortuna.

"These are whales which are taken as part of the quota, and if they are inedible clearly they cannot be 'landed'," on the record books.

"It's a problem for them in terms of distributing meat in the villages there."

According to conservation group WWF, gray whales are primarily bottom feeders, filtering their food from ocean water through special "bristly" structures in their mouths.

They stay close to the shore and feed in shallow waters.

Ilyashenko said Chukchi whale hunters have learnt to identify "stinky whales" from afar—their unappetising whiff can sometimes be caught downwind when the massive mammals blow out air.

But it is not always possible, and sometimes the offending funk is only discovered after the whale is killed and brought to shore.

"The Chukotka hunters say that there are about 10 percent of such whales in the sea," the Russian said.

The IWC was asked to instruct its scientific committee to investigate the origins of the foulness, and for "stinky whales" not to be counted towards the Chukchi's tally of landed whales.

Several rounds of lab tests failed to identify the cause.

Some seals, walrus and birds in the region, said Ilyashenko, "have the same problem. They are also stinky".

© 2016 AFP

Citation: 'Stinky whale' whiff wafts over whaling talks (2016, October 26) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-10-stinky-whale-whiff-wafts-whaling.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.