

# After decades, Japan courts controversy resuming commercial whaling

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Japan's decision in December to withdraw from the International Whaling Commission sparked a firestorm of criticism from environmentalists

Japanese fishermen set sail on Monday to hunt whales commercially for the first time in more than three decades after Tokyo's controversial

withdrawal from the International Whaling Commission (IWC) triggered outrage from environmental groups.

The planned hunts, while small and far from internationally protected waters, have also sparked anger in countries where whaling is considered outdated and harmful.

But in Japan, whaling communities hailed the return of the practice, with Tokyo defending it as a tradition that should not be subject to outside interference.

For years, the issue of whaling was a diplomatic headache for Japan, which came under attack for exploiting an IWC loophole to hunt whales for "scientific" purposes.

Critics accused Japan of effectively carrying out stealth whaling, saying the hunts had no scientific value, while Tokyo continued to push for permission to resume commercial whaling outright.

But last year it announced it would simply withdraw from the IWC and no longer comply with its decades-old ban on commercial killing of the ocean giants.

The decision comes into effect from July 1, when a flotilla of ships that once carried out whaling for "[scientific research](#)" will set sail from the Shimonoseki port in western Japan.

Elsewhere, five small whaling boats from across the country will gather in Kushiro port in northern Japan and start hunting minke for about a week in a symbolic event celebrating the resumption of the practice.

**'Heart full of hope'**

"We are very excited at the resumption of commercial whaling," Yoshifumi Kai, head of the Japan Small-Type Whaling Association, told AFP ahead of the departure.

"My heart is full of hope," added Kai, who belongs to a fisheries cooperative in Taiji in Wakayama prefecture, an area known for both whale and dolphin hunting.

Japan's decision in December to withdraw from the IWC sparked a firestorm of criticism from environmentalists and anti-whaling countries such as Australia, New Zealand and Canada.

It came after years of failed attempts by Tokyo to convince the IWC to allow it to resume commercial whaling, arguing that stocks of certain species were now sufficient to support renewed hunting.



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The decision means Japan will end its most provocative expeditions, in protected Antarctic waters, and instead concentrate on commercial whaling of minke and other whales off its shores.

Japan has hunted whales for centuries and the meat was a key source of protein in the immediate post-World War II years when the country was desperately poor.

But consumption has declined significantly in recent decades, with much of the population saying they rarely or never eat whale meat, and activists have pressed Japan to ditch the practice.

## **'Path towards extinction'**

Animal conservation groups from across the world sent a letter to the Group of 20 leaders meeting in the Japanese city of Osaka over the weekend urging them to call for an "immediate end to all commercial whaling."

"Japan leaving the IWC and defying international law to pursue its [commercial whaling](#) ambitions is renegade, retrograde and myopic," said Kitty Block, president of Humane Society International based in the UK.

Tokyo is "undermining its reputation for an industry whose days are so clearly numbered, to produce a product for which demand has



plummeted", she said.

But some conservationists and experts say Japan's whaling industry is already on its last legs for economic reasons, with consumption shrinking steadily and no sign of a market recovery.

"What we are seeing is the beginning of the end of Japanese whaling," said Patrick Ramage, director of marine conservation at the International Fund for Animal Welfare.

"Japan is quitting high-seas whaling... not yet a full stop, but that is a huge step towards the end of killing [whales](#) for their meat and other products," he said, adding he does not believe coastal whaling will survive given dwindling subsidies and [consumer demand](#).

Masayuki Komatsu, a former top Japanese negotiator at the IWC between 1991 and 2004, said Tokyo should return to the organisation or risk seeing whaling die out altogether.

Compared to research whaling programmes in the Antarctic and the Northern Pacific, "the size of coastal whaling is tiny," he told AFP.

"The withdrawal from the IWC means the Japanese whaling industry is on the path towards extinction."

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