

Japan fisherman catch first whales as commercial hunts resume

July 1 2019, by Harumi Ozawa



Japanese whalers caught two minke whales off the northern shores of the country as the first commercial hunts resumed

Japanese whalers brought ashore their first catches Monday as they resumed commercial hunting after a three-decade hiatus, brushing aside

criticism from activists who say the practice is cruel and outdated.

Five vessels set sail under grey morning skies from northern Japan's Kushiro with their horns blaring and grey tarps thrown over their harpoons. By Monday afternoon they were back with their catch: two grey minke whales.

The hunts come after Japan decided to withdraw from the International Whaling Commission, a move slammed by activists and anti-whaling countries but welcomed by Japanese whaling communities.

"Today is the best day," said Yoshifumi Kai, head of the Japan Small-Type Whaling Association, as the ocean giants were hauled ashore.

"It was worth waiting for 31 years," he said with a smile.

One of the whales, more than eight metres (27 feet) long, was hoisted from a ship onto a truck and driven to a warehouse.

Inside, whalers hosed it down with water and then lined up to pour ceremonial cups of the Japanese liquor sake over the animal—a ritual to purify and celebrate the catch.

Vessels left from other ports elsewhere in Japan on Monday, including in Shimonoseki in the west of the country, and whalers and government officials hailed the resumption of the hunts.



Japan plans to catch 227 whales through the commercial hunting season until December

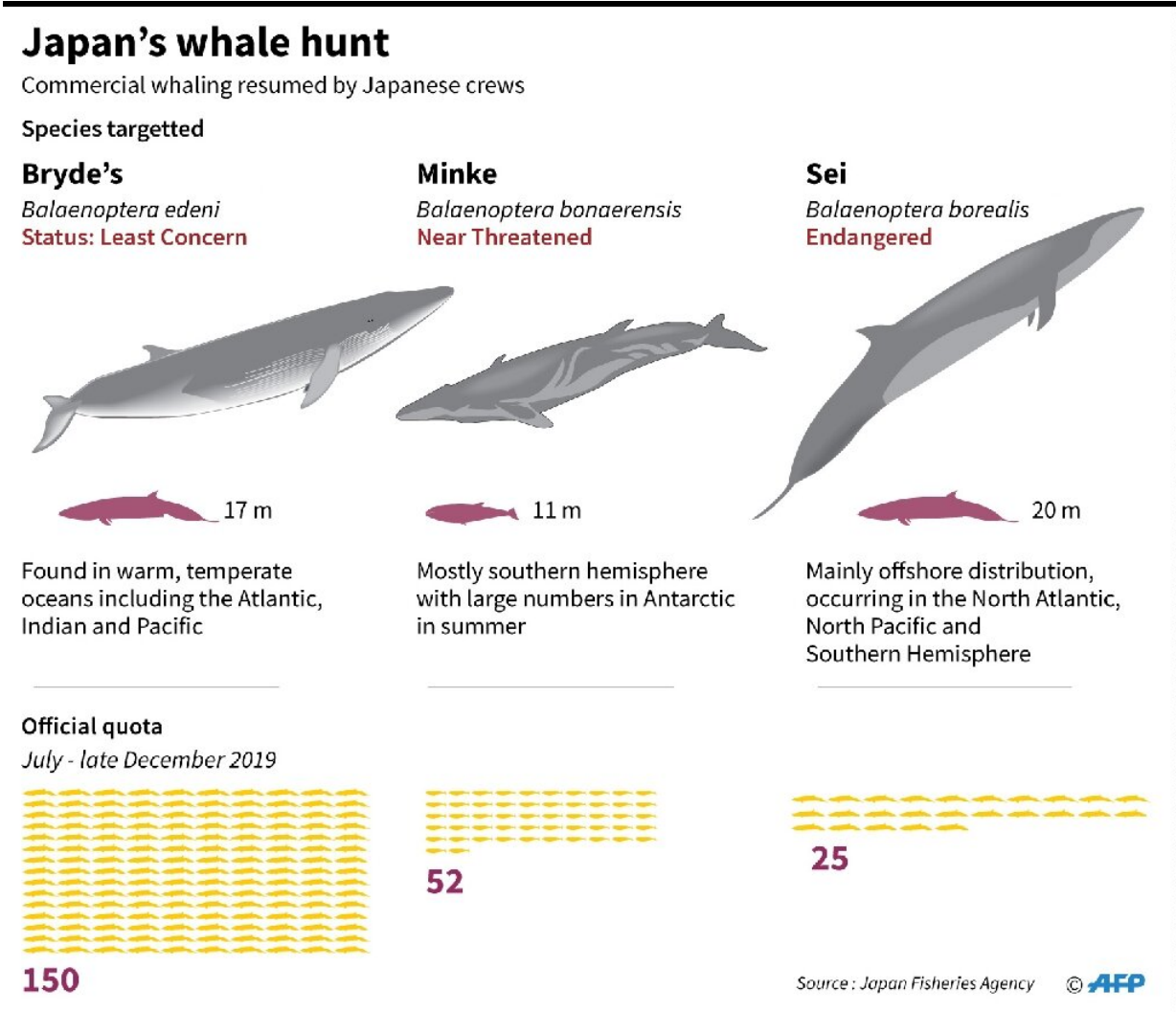
"I'm a bit nervous but happy that we can start whaling," 23-year-old Hideki Abe, a whaler from the Miyagi region in northern Japan, told AFP before leaving from Kushiro.

"I don't think young people know how to cook and eat whale meat any more. I want more people to try to taste it at least once."

'Pirate whaling'

"This is a small industry, but I am proud of hunting whales," added Kai in a ceremony before the boats left from Kushiro.

"People have hunted whales for more than 400 years in my home town."



Graphic on the targets of Japan's first commercial whaling season since the country walked out of the International Whaling Commission

Whaling has long proved a rare diplomatic flashpoint for Tokyo, which says the practice is a Japanese tradition that should not be subject to international interference.

As an IWC member, Japan was banned from commercial hunts of large whales, though it could catch small varieties in waters near its coastline.

But it also exploited a loophole in the body's rules to carry out highly controversial hunts of whales in protected Antarctic waters under the banner of "scientific research".

Activists said the hunts had no scientific value, and Japan made no secret of the fact that meat from whales caught on those hunts ended up sold for consumption.

With its withdrawal from the IWC, Tokyo will carry out whale hunting off Japan, but will end the most contentious hunts in the Antarctic.



Activists have slammed Japan for resuming the hunts, but it says the practice is

longstanding tradition

The country's Fisheries Agency said Monday it had set a cap for a total catch of 227 whales through the season until late December—52 minke, 150 Bryde's and 25 sei whales.

Humane Society International slammed the resumption of commercial hunts.

"This is a sad day for whale protection globally," said the group's head of campaigns Nicola Beynon, accusing Japan of beginning a "new and shocking era of pirate whaling".

'Way of life'

Japanese officials say the hunts will protect an ancient tradition.



Whale meat was once an important source of protein in Japan, but the market for it has dwindled

"The resumption of commercial whaling has been an ardent wish for whalers across the country," Shigeto Hase, the head of Japan's fisheries agency, said at the departure ceremony in Kushiro.

"The culture and way of life will be passed on to the next generation".

Whale meat was a key source of protein in the immediate post-World War II years in Japan, when the country was desperately poor.

Most reports suggest consumption has declined significantly in recent

decades—with much of the population saying they rarely or never eat whale meat.

But a Japanese government official said "demand has been stable".



Whaling has long proved a rare diplomatic flashpoint for Tokyo

"It is totally false that commercial whaling will not be viable as demand is declining," he said.

Some believe that Japan's return to commercial whale hunting will effectively sound the death knell for the industry, with a shrinking

market and dwindling subsidies.

"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.

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