

Whale Meat Trade in East Asia: A Review of the Markets in 1997

A TRAFFIC Network Report

Executive summary

Whale meat is not a popular nor common food among Chinese cultures. In East Asia, the consumption of whale meat is widespread only in Japan and in communities along the southeastern coastal region of South Korea, which are influenced by Japanese culture. While whale meat had long been a part of the Japanese diet, consumption increased markedly after World War II, when US occupation forces encouraged whaling by Japan to prevent famine.

The International Whaling Commission (IWC) adopted a moratorium on commercial whaling in 1982, which entered into force in 1986 under the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling (ICRW). By 1986, all whales covered by the IWC moratorium had been banned from international commercial trade under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

Despite the IWC moratorium, Japan continues to catch Minke Whales in the Antarctic and North Pacific Oceans for scientific purposes. However, although it holds reservations on several CITES-listed whale species, Japan does not allow international commercial trade in whale meat.

Japanese and South Korean fisherman also incidentally catch whales covered under the IWC moratorium in their respective coastal waters, though government guidelines stipulate that whale bycatch can only be used when the animals are found dead in fishing gear and only for "local consumption".

Japan's scientific whaling and its frozen stocks of whale meat from legal imports of the past, as well as legal whale bycatch in Japan and South Korea mean that whale meat is openly and legally for sale in Japan and South Korea. Whale meat also occasionally has been found for sale in Hong Kong, which is a violation of local law. In addition, Taiwan at one time had large stocks of whale meat left from before whaling was banned there in 1981. For these reasons, TRAFFIC has periodically surveyed the wholesale and retail markets for whale meat in Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong and Taiwan to assess availability, prices and possible illegal trade.

This report presents the results of TRAFFIC's 1997 surveys of whale meat markets in Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong and Taiwan. These surveys were undertaken in preparation for the tenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to CITES, which will take place in June 1997. Delegates at the meeting will consider five proposals by Japan and Norway to re-open international commercial trade in whale meat.

FINDINGS

Japan

Japan's domestic market for whale meat is active and widespread. As least one Japanese expert claims that supply of whale meat in Japan is not meeting demand. The unregulated legal market and possible unmet demand offer incentive for adding illegal supplies to the unregulated legal market.

There are three avenues by which whale meat can enter Japan's market legally. The first, via a single factory ship used to process the meat from scientific whaling, enables easy tracking of the resulting whale meat because DNA profiles are kept and catalogued for each whale caught. The other two means by which whale meat enters the market – from frozen stocks and bycatch – make monitoring of the market for illegal whale meat nearly impossible and present avenues by which illegal whale meat can be injected into the large legal supply.

In 1995, TRAFFIC bought 53 whale meat samples and in 1996, four more samples for analysis. At the time of writing this report, the Japanese Fisheries Agency and an independent Japanese researcher were completing DNA analysis of these samples to ascertain species.¹

However, until Japan inventories its frozen whale meat supplies, illegal meat from nearly any Minke, Sei, Fin, Bryde's or Sperm Whale could enter the market and pass as meat from frozen supplies. More importantly, illegal meat of virtually any whale species covered under the IWC moratorium could enter the market and be dismissed as bycatch. Therefore, reliably detecting illegal whale meat on Japan's huge, and by some accounts unsatiated, market is nearly impossible.

South Korea

South Korea has two major legal loopholes through which South Koreans may take whales and/or sell illegally obtained whale meat without penalty.

Firstly, South Korea's rules governing whale bycatch are unclear and not legally binding, opening the possibility that illegal directed catch of whales could be passed off as "accidental". Secondly, South Korea's guidelines for disposal of whale bycatch, which like Japan allow for "local consumption" of "dead" whales, are ambiguous. In practice, fishermen and traders seem to be interpreting these guidelines as allowing unregulated domestic trade in whale meat throughout South Korea, as long as the whale is dead when taken from the sea.

This unregulated trade seems to contradict South Korea's 1986 ban on commercial whaling. In fact, the number of Minke Whales taken as bycatch in 1996 was greater than the number taken in each of the last two years before South Korea banned commercial whaling in 1986. Korean whalers reported taking 122 Minke Whales in 1985 and 69 in 1986, compared to the 128 claimed to be taken incidentally in 1996.

TRAFFIC found whale meat for sale in five major coastal cities in South Korea, and 18 meat samples were collected. The government of South Korea assisted TRAFFIC in sending those samples to the National Marine Fisheries Service in the USA for DNA analysis. Results are not expected until later this year.

Hong Kong

TRAFFIC found that whale meat is not openly available at Japanese restaurants in Hong Kong restaurants, but apparently served in these restaurants if specifically requested in advance.

Seven of 27 restaurants investigated by TRAFFIC offered whale meat, though only one promised immediate availability. The remaining six said they needed from two to 10 days to obtain whale meat, indicating that whale meat is ordered from a source outside Hong Kong. In most cases, Japan was cited as the source.

A subsequent law enforcement operation by the Hong Kong government led to the seizure of three meat samples from the restaurants investigated by TRAFFIC. At the time of publication, DNA analysis of these samples was being carried out in the USA by the National Marine Fisheries Service in a co-operative arrangement

between the Government of Hong Kong and the Service, facilitated by TRAFFIC.²

Whale meat was found printed on only one menu in Hong Kong, but government law enforcement officials found no whale meat on the premises of this restaurant.

Certainly, Hong Kong should not be considered a major consumer of whale meat. However, ensuring that illegal whale meat trade is not occurring in Hong Kong is essential to ensure compliance with the IWC moratorium and CITES. It is equally important to investigate further the probability that whale meat is being smuggled out of Japan to supply Japanese restaurants in Hong Kong and, perhaps, other cities in East and Southeast Asia.

Taiwan

TRAFFIC found no evidence of a continuing market for meat of large cetaceans in Taiwan. The market for meat from small cetaceans was beyond the scope of the 1997 investigation, but this trade deserves further investigation in Taiwan.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Without a doubt, the most serious problems with regard to illegal catch and trade in whales are found in Japan, which is the largest market for whale meat, and South Korea, where the scale of Minke Whale bycatch may pose a conservation risk. Weaknesses in laws and regulatory systems in both countries provide opportunities for illegal catch of whales and trade in illegally obtained whale meat. These loopholes work to prevent adequate control and monitoring of both markets at wholesale and retail levels. Therefore, TRAFFIC recommends that Japan and South Korea each:

- Clarify and strengthen laws and regulations regarding the reporting and disposal of whale bycatch, making mandatory both the reporting of bycatch and the submission of tissue samples from each whale taken via bycatch for the purposes of DNA identification.
- Create a system by which all legally obtained whale meat from all sources is inventoried and recorded using DNA profiling before entering the market, for reference in frequent monitoring of whale sold at wholesale and retail levels.
- Identify, prosecute and fine those catching whales by illegal means and those failing to report whale bycatch properly.

The offers of whale meat in Japanese restaurants in Hong Kong were also of concern. This phenomenon is worth investigating further and in other markets catering to Japanese tourists, such as those in Singapore, Bangkok and Jakarta.

¹ DNA testing of the 57 whale meat samples collected by TRAFFIC investigators in Japan in 1995 and 1996 was concluded by an independent Japanese researcher while this report was in press. Most of the samples were found to be Minke Whale, though meat from Fin and Bryde's Whales were found among the samples. As Japan has not inventoried its frozen stocks using DNA analysis and has not required mandatory tissue samples from all whale bycatch, it is impossible to conclude whether these Fin and Bryde's Whale samples are from legal or illegal sources.

² DNA analysis by the National Marine Fisheries Service in the USA concluded while this report was in press. The analysis found that two samples were fish and one was a Short-Finned Pilot Whale, which is not covered by the IWC moratorium but is listed in Appendix II of CITES. Possession of CITES Appendix II specimens is illegal in Hong Kong without a licence in Hong Kong, and prosecution will be pursued by the government.