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No One Eats Whales. Why Does Anyone Kill Them?

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More jobs are created by watching the creatures than by hunting them.
TBM_100621_whaleARTICLE.jpg [1]

Starting today at a Moroccan beach resort, 88 member countries of the International Whaling Commission—11 of them landlocked—will open what may turn out to be history's climactic battle over the hunting of whales.

An IWC proposal to relax its toothless 1986 moratorium on commercial whaling in exchange for greater conservation powers and controls over how hunting is executed could pass, fail, or be amended by a three-quarters vote that would legitimize whaling for a time, while planning its ultimate extinction. Russia and China will be among the voting nations, but this is a highly emotional war that pits whalers Japan, Norway, and Iceland against customary free-trade allies that include the United States, France, Germany, Australia, New Zealand, and Brazil.

No one knows what will happen when votes are taken this week, following years of negotiations. "There's more than an even chance they won't be able to come up anything we can live with," says Gerry Leape, senior officer for international policy at Pew Environmental Group, which joined with Greenpeace and the WWF in expressing willingness to accept limited coastal whaling "of some species" by the three nations for a time if six conditions for bolder conservation by the IWC are met. (Many NGOs oppose any compromise, although almost 2,000 whales were slaughtered last year under the current ban.)

But the larger question is: Why does anyone bother to hunt whales anymore? The economics of whale hunting are simply dismal. No whaling nation profits from it. Japan's annual, much-criticized Antarctic hunt hasn't involved private capital for years. As Leape notes: "Japan's is a very small industry, employing less than 1,000 people, catching many more whales than they can sell. They try to promote it with school children and free-whale-meat days and it's not catching on."

In Norway, although government-subsidized coastal whalers have missed their annual quota nine times in the last decade, blubber stockpiles mount as consumers ignore state-backed ad campaigns for burgers, ham, and pastrami made of whale. The government cut off subsidies that paid for the whalers' inspection program, leaving only an electronic system that the IWC deems unacceptable, according to "Sink or Swim: The Economics of Whaling today," a 2009 study by the Whale & Dolphin Conservation Society [2].

That came weeks after Iceland's Ministry for Fisheries & Agriculture announced that a report it had commissioned from the University of Iceland's Institute of Economic Studies (neither the institute nor the ministry have posted it) said that the economically devastated country could benefit from killing 300 whales annually. Conceding that direct whaling profits were not quantifiable, the study attributed most of the projected gain to $94 million in additional fish that it estimated would be caught if some whales were killed, according to *Iceland Review* online.

Apart from the fact that international law bars nations from regarding migrant creatures as domestic spawn—and that whales devour other predators that feed on Iceland's fisheries—scholars haven't accepted the assertion that

fewer whales mean more fish for people. The authors of "Should Whales be Culled to Increase Fishery Yield [3]?"—published last year in *Science*—dismissed this oft-repeated argument.

The University of Iceland study said that taking and processing 300 whales annually could sustain—wait for it—80 to 90 jobs. The optimistic projections about whale hunting depend on selling meat to Japan, where the wholesale price has fallen by nearly half since 1994. (A key proposal at the IWC talks would ban exports.) But the Japanese don't want the stuff; a National Public Radio story broadcast Monday [4] noted that "the desperate, immediate postwar period is the only time in Japanese history when whale meat was consumed nationwide." Thus, exports are a fantasy: Last year, Iceland reported exporting a whopping three kilograms of whale meat. In Norway, stocks have turned out to be contaminated with dioxins and PCBs, and the government has repeatedly warned pregnant and nursing women. Both nations have turned stockpiles into pet food.

Toxins are a growing issue in Japan, where right-wing protestors have managed to keep *The Cove [5]*, an Oscar-winning documentary about the capture and slaughter of dolphins in a Japanese coastal community, from screening in theaters that booked it. One of the movie's key points is that meat from cetaceans taken in Japan's coastal waters contains risky levels of neurotoxic mercury.

This may be why Japan insists on conducting annual "scientific whaling" expeditions in the IWC's 15-year-old Southern Ocean Whale Sanctuary: Up to 80% of the world's whales dwell in waters with the lowest oceanic toxin levels. While the IWC's compromise proposal would grant Japan fewer Antarctic whales than it currently kills, conservation groups adamantly oppose any tolerance of whaling there.

"There are no whale populations that are out of the woods yet," says Dr. Howard Rosenbaum, director of the Wildlife Conservation Society's Ocean Giants Program and its global conservation programs.* "The sanctuaries are critical as safe havens for whales, which face cumulative effects from pollutants, habitats, fisheries, threats from resumed whaling, entanglement in nets, noise, and climate change—which is the biggest threat," he says. "None is good for whales."

Whales can provide jobs, however—for the whale-watching industry. Just as East Africa profitably evolved from a Big Game hunting ground to a prime destination for photo safaris, a just-released working paper from the University of British Columbia reports that whale-watching has become a $2.1 billion business [6] that employs 13,000 workers in 68 nations to entertain 13 million annual viewers.

That tally could increase by $830 million, creating jobs in scores of additional maritime countries for a further 11,000 workers—many of them idled professionals whose local fish stocks have been scooped up by trawlers. The study's numbers are conservative: Its authors assume that every penny derives from tourists who are already visiting for other reasons. Developing nations with excellent whale-watching opportunities—and meager tourism—are apportioned little of this ancillary spending. "The assumption that investing in whale watching will necessarily boost total tourism has been avoided," the study says, projecting its gains for countries with a relative abundance of both tourists and whales.

Explains Dr. Rashid Sumaila, lead author and director of UBC's Fisheries Center: "It would be easy to create a model [for building numbers], but we chose to take what was given." The lesson: Countries that want to start cashing in on the giant mammals will need to invest in infrastructure for general tourism.

Which brings everything back to Japan—its position at the IWC talks will be the key to any compromise. Will Japan's shaky government continue to spend money on a program that feeds few, employs fewer, and antagonizes hundreds of millions—or, more importantly, that threatens the potential of the whale-watching industry? "If whale populations in the southern Ocean are disturbed and not able to feed sufficiently … it is possible that they would not have the energy to make their long migrations to their tropical wintering regions," warns a just-published report from the WWF [7]. If whales are killed—or if their food is cut off by climate change or overfishing—they won't show up to greet tourists.

That would disappoint a lot of Japanese. "Whale-watching," notes Leape, "is growing faster in Japan than

anywhere else.”

*__CORRECTION (June 22, 2010):__ *Dr. Howard Rosenbaum, a member of the IWC’s Science Committee, was wrongly identified as an employee of the Wilderness Society; he is director of the Wildlife Conservation Society’s Ocean Giants Program and its global conservation programs.*

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