The Japan Times

IWC CONFERENCE CLOSE-UP

Japan refutes 'marine Darth Vader' charges

By DAVID McNEILL

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ANCHORAGE, Alaska Transformed by oil money from the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, and boasting probably more gas-guzzling SUVs per person than any other American city, on a bad day Anchorage can resemble a giant foggy parking lot.

But it is also surrounded by some of the most pristine wilderness on the planet. Moose and bears roam the mountains, and sea otters, orcas and humpback whales ply the nearby Prince William Sound as they likely have for millennia.

Japan's IWC commissioner Joji Morishita (far left) addresses the press in Anchorage on May 28. Native Americans promoting their subsistence whaling (left) protest outside the hotel hosting the IWC conference. A humpback whale (below) breaches off Maui in Hawaii in January 2005. Japan plans to kill 50 of this species classed as "vulnerable." DAVID McNEILL PHOTO

The whales are blissfully unaware of the bitter struggle being fought in their name just a harpoon shot away in the Hotel Captain Cook, where the battle-hardened troops of the environmental movement are gathered this week for one of the key events in their calendar — the International Whaling Commission conference.

In the hotel lobby, delegates from the IWC's 70-odd member countries, and dozens of environmental nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), greet each other like war veterans. Some have been coming to these conferences for decades, outliving Soviet communism, several U.S. presidents and tens of thousands of whales.

Officially, 29,000 whales have been slaughtered since the IWC's worldwide moratorium on commercial whaling came into effect in 1986. Most have been done in by Japan, Norway and Iceland. Many more of

these air-breathing mammals have been tangled and drowned in fishing nets — a "by-catch" that conservationists say causes 300,000 fatalities a year. Others die in collisions with ships or from ingesting oil, chemicals and plastic in the increasingly polluted oceans.

The small amount of meat harvested is increasingly too polluted to eat.

Iceland's commercial whaling campaign (restarted last year) has already stalled, perhaps permanently, over concerns about levels of mercury and other toxic chemicals found in carcasses. Meanwhile, apart from dangers associated with its deep-sea catch, Japan's coastal whalers continue to dump meat on shop shelves that has repeatedly been tested and found to contain levels of mercury in excess of Japan's own safety limits.

Conservationists incensed

Unsurprisingly, the conservationists in Anchorage are more incensed than ever that harpoon-wielding men in oilskins are still adding to the whales' woes.

"With so many other factors impacting whale populations worldwide, it is incredible that the IWC is still entertaining the idea of commercial whaling," said Junichi Sato of Greenpeace Japan.

Like most of his conservationist colleagues, he wants a commitment this year to transform the IWC into a "body that works for the whales and not the whalers."

Unfortunately, the pro-whaling nations see the IWC in exactly opposite terms, clinging to what they say is its original mission — the managed, sustainable use of whale resources.

Japan has never accepted the conservationist takeover of the IWC, and has waged a $ 750-million campaign — making extensive use of Overseas Development Aid (ODA) — to swing the organization back to support for commercial whaling. Last year, it won a narrow vote for the first time in a quarter of a century, a symbolic victory that stunned environmentalists.

That victory will be short lived. Six new anti-whaling nations have since signed up, while Japan has reportedly managed to recruit just one: Laos. The word on Monday was that several poorer pro-whaling nations had failed to appear.

Delegates in the past have, according to conservationists, been known to arrive at the last minute clutching the $ 10,000 IWC membership fee in cash, paid for by Japan.

"We'll be keeping an eye on the corridors for people carrying brown envelopes," said Leah Garces of the World Society for the Protection of Animals.

Whoever turns up, a return to commercial whaling, which needs a 75 percent IWC majority, is as far away as ever, thus much of the focus this year is on whether frustrated Japan Fisheries Agency bureaucrats will harpoon one of the conference's key votes: the aboriginal whaling quota.

Alaskan aborigines, for example, are allowed to kill about 50 bowhead whales for "non-commercial" purposes. Japan may use that as leverage to secure rights for its own "traditional" coastal whaling, or attempt to trade off numbers from its annual "scientific program" in return for a coastal quota.

In the meantime, the trigger fingers of Japan's whaling fleet are again growing itchy. Whatever happens in Anchorage, they will be out this year to hunt 50 humpbacks and 50 fin whales, along with almost 1,000 minke, Bryde's, sei and sperm whales.

The humpback is classed by most environmentalists as one of the planet's more imperiled species — but not by Japan.

"We don't see it as endangered," said Joji Morishita, Tokyo's alternate IWC commissioner.

Uniformly standard suits

Morishita spends much of his time here surrounded by a buzzing hive of Western reporters, patiently explaining in flawless English that Japan is not the Darth Vader of the marine world. "It is not true that we want free, uncontrolled whaling," he said last weekend. "We would like to have managed, controlled whaling, with quotas and enforcement."

The huge contingent of Japanese delegates can be easily spotted at the conference with their uniformly standard dark suits and dangling mobile-phone straps. They will mostly sit in stony-faced silence, listening through interpreters to three days of grandstanding and mud-slinging, as Japan's painstakingly collected research on whales is thrashed as "junk science."

Many conservationists are contemptuous of Japan's claim that whales eat "five times more fish" than humans and must therefore be culled.

One of the more memorable recent statements on that research came from marine scientist Daniel Pauly from the University of British Columbia, who said: "Birds consume 100 million tons of fish a year, but if you proposed culling birds, you would get a declaration of war from the

United Kingdom."

The annual IWC vitriol-fests, now dragging on into their third decade, have grown increasingly wearying for both sides, while also sparking some potentially radical new initiatives.

New Zealand's IWC commissioner, the former Prime Minister Sir Geoffrey Palmer, was heckled at a fringe meeting on Sunday when he said that a return to limited commercial whaling might be considered.

Announcing a new attempt led by the esteemed U.S.-based Pew Charitable trusts to find a solution to the whaling stalemate, he said: "The IWC is paralyzed at the moment and something has got to give. The current system is outdated and is failing to provide whales with the protection they need."

With the debate stalled, the media pack has found more excitement outside the hotel. Local TV stations here have filed breathless reports on the "unprecedented" security surrounding the conference, including hundreds of armed police and private guards. The cops easily outnumbered a small weekend parade of anti-whaling demonstrators — some dressed in furry whale costumes and carrying signs declaring "Surfers for Cetaceans" — that snaked its way through the Anchorage streets.

"We've heard those Greenpeace guys can be over the top," said a beefy cop in wraparound shades.

"This is a peaceful part of the world and we want to keep it that way."

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