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Japanese case for whaling dismissed

Andrew Darby in New York
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JAPAN'S case to begin whaling of humpbacks that migrate along the Australian coast has been undermined by one of the world's leading fisheries scientists.

The claim by Japan that reviving humpbacks are outcompeting Antarctic minke whales for food was dismissed by Daniel Pauly, a specialist in global fish stocks.

Humpbacks that begin their annual winter migration along the Australian coast within weeks face Japanese harpoons next summer in Antarctica, where the whalers plan to take 50.

As part of the rationale for the "scientific whaling" program, Japanese whalers claim that the rapid growth of the humpback population has meant a "shift in dominance" among Antarctic whales. It says that the humpbacks have begun to push minke whales into poorer feeding grounds.

However Dr Pauly, the director of the University of British Columbia's Fisheries Centre, said no such problem existed.

"These whales compete within complex food webs, and not directly with each other," he said.

A symposium on whale conservation at the United Nations heard that Japan blamed whales for declines in fish catches.

The claim has been repeated by poorer Caribbean and African nations that depend on local fisheries and vote with Japan in the International Whaling Commission.

The Japanese Institute of Cetacean Research says that the total annual prey consumption by whales and dolphins around the world is more than 249 million tonnes.

Dr Pauly said Japanese fisheries negotiators were beginning to argue for the culling of whales to save fisheries, claiming they were seeking an "ecosystem balance". But he said there was little real overlap between the food that whales ate and human fisheries.

Although there was some local competition with fisheries, such as for herring off Iceland, in regions like Antarctica they ate shrimp-like krill almost exclusively.

"And therefore if we slaughtered all marine mammals now it would make no difference for the fishermen," Dr Pauly said.

Instead, having whales and seals in the marine ecosystem could enhance the strength of fisheries. "Marine mammals not only eat prey, they eat things that compete with that prey."

Organisms such as jellyfish, which were of little use as human food, would be left to flourish without whales, he said.

Dr Pauly said it was time to remove subsidies that protected inefficient fishing, and to extend the attack to whaling. "It probably would fade out in Japan if it were not subsidised."

The symposium heard that the World Trade Organisation was likely to tackle fish subsidies as part of Doha round

negotiations at a date yet to be fixed. "One could also ask the WTO to look at this subsidisation of whaling," Dr Pauly said.

Hosted by the UN Environment Program, the symposium has been called to look at breaking the deadlock in the International Whaling Commission.

Andrew Darby travelled to New York with assistance from the Pew Charitable Trusts.

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