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Japanese whaling industry struggles as hostility grows

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Article Launched: 11/18/2007 01:49:33 AM PST

WADA, Japan - A whale's bleeding carcass bobbed in the surf, a steel harpoon jutting from its side. Then butchers at this Japanese fishing village went to work, turning a motorized winch to haul the beast ashore.

On the flensing floor, the men blessed it with rice wine - then hacked through blubber and sinew with long-handled knives, slicing vermilion flesh from the massive spine. Blood gushed from the 30-foot Baird's beaked whale like water from a hydrant.

Finally, the meat was chopped into brick-sized blocks, weighed and priced for townsfolk who lined up for their purchases. Restaurateurs drove away with plastic drums of whale.

For the world's anti-whaling activists, it's an atrocity that must be stopped. But the men who harpoon, flense and sell these whales at four small-scale coastal hunting communities have another word for it: tradition.

"Coastal people have been eating whale for 400 years and we have a right to decide what we eat," declared Yoshinori Shoji, head of the Gaibo Hoge whaling company, based in Wada, a two-hour drive east of Tokyo.

These days, that tradition is much harder to maintain.

Even though the 1986 international moratorium on commercial whaling applies more to the high seas than to Japanese coastal outfits, it has severely cut supply, driving prices higher and speeding the meat's plunge in popularity.

The ban also restricts the types of smaller whales that can be hunted, such as a former favorite of the coastal operations - the minke. Small-time whalers now commercially hunt only whales that are not regulated internationally.

Japan's coastal whalers also suffer from a global PR problem.

Amid an active anti-whaling movement, many people in Europe, the United States, Australia and New Zealand consider killing whales an environmental and moral crime, and grisly scenes such as the ones in Wada reinforce the image of whaling as barbaric.

The campaign touches a nationalist chord among Japanese, who feel it's discriminatory and hypocritical, given that Japanese whaling only took off after World War II because U.S. occupation authorities encouraged it as a source of food.

'Double standards'

"They just completely reject people whose thinking isn't the same as theirs," says the industry's point man in the southern whaling town of Taiji, Yoji Kita. "In their 'global standard,' there are a lot of double standards."

When people here speak of tradition, they mean family-owned company boats targeting small game just 20 miles from the shore, rather than the Japanese factory fleets, which range as far afield as the Antarctic and pull in a total of more than 1,000 whales per year.

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This year, coastal whalers operating out of four main ports are set to take a total of 66 Baird's beaked whales, 72 pilot whales - which look like dolphins - and 20 Risso dolphins.

Minke whales, of which they used to take 300 a year, have been banned from the hunt by the International Whaling Commission since the 1980s, though Japan takes many minke whales - and eats the meat - as part of an IWC-allowed scientific whaling program.

The whaling companies, however, say the moratorium is sinking their business.

Japan's eight coastal whaling companies now use only five of their nine whaling boats for coastal operations. Populations in whaling towns have dropped, and village administrators complain about shrinking tax bases.

Short on sympathy

"Everyone here is in the red," Shoji said as his men sliced fat from the cubes of meat and dumped buckets of innards into a huge vat for processing into fertilizer.

The complaint gets little international sympathy.

A Japanese proposal to win "community whaling" status that would have allowed limited minke whale hunts failed at an IWC meeting in May. Critics argue that Japan's coastal operations are strictly commercial, using modern industrial methods such as mechanized harpoon guns, while community hunts are conducted by aboriginal people as ceremonies or to harvest a vital food source.

"Long ago, they used their own boats and caught whales with nets. But since the early 1900s, they've been using methods imported from

Norway," said Junichi Sato of Greenpeace Japan. "So it's not at all as if they were preserving a tradition."

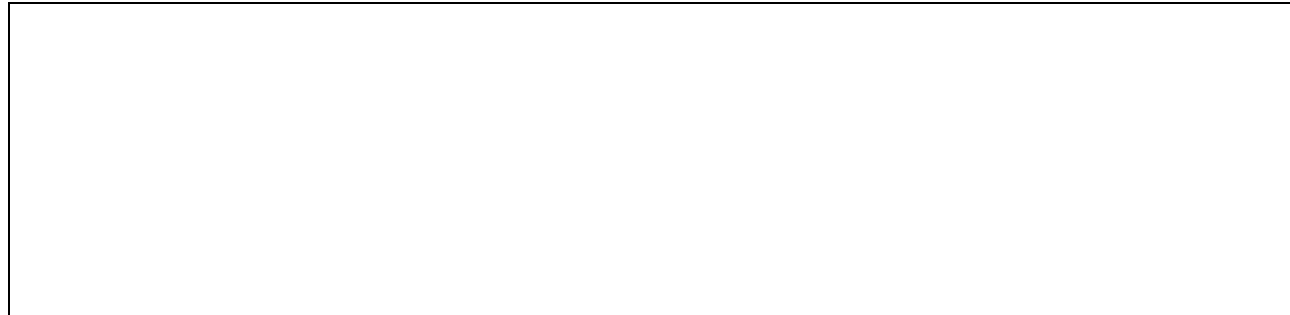
Japan's industrial whaling may be 20th century, but its roots are old.

Organized whaling began in the early 1600s in Taiji, a town about 300 miles southwest of Tokyo, whose phone book is full of names rooted in whaling: Seko - harpooner; Ryono - whaling boat sailor.

Shrines to the animals, including one where feudal hunters brought fetuses found in pregnant whales, dot the town. Villagers stage a whale festival on the bluff where spotters in the 17th century watched for approaching whales.

"Whaling is not just an occupation for them - it's pride, it's history," said Hayato Sakurai, curator of the Taiji Whale Museum, which was established in 1969 and features an enormous replica of the skeleton of a blue whale.

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