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Commercial Whaling: A delinquent history and its contemporary problems

Dinosaurs were considered the largest animals to have ever lived on the earth. This argument held water until blue whales appeared on the scene as the largest mammal. During the research on commercial whaling, it was figured out that blue whales are the largest mammals ever to have lived on earth. These amazing marine mammals are the king of the ocean with 100 feet in length and 200 tons in weight. Whales are easy to see; they can be found in all of the world major oceans i.e. from the Pacific Ocean to the Antarctic Oceans. They are a special gift of God to us. Staying on the top of the food chain, whales born without any natural predators and their presence is critical for maintaining the normal recycling of the ocean biosystem. However, according to the specialists from International Union for Conservation Nature, five species out of over ninety recognized species of whales live in the ocean are classified as endangered species which includes the blue whale, fin whale, north pacific right whale, North Atlantic right whale, and sei whale. Save these five species, a couple more whale species are classified as lower risk endangered species. The largest-ever animal, blue whales, are less than 25,000 according to the estimation of the International Union for Conservation Nature. Whales are under multiple threats such as entanglement, commercial whaling, ship strikes, and climate changes. The mammal experienced extermination owing to commercial whaling during the 20th century. Moreover, the impacts of climate change could be no less than a challenge that whales have to cope with. Climate change is another threat for the population of krill which is a tiny crustacean that constitutes the major part of whales’ diet. Ship striking is another phenomenon that renders the annihilation of blue whales.

Undoubtedly, whales are affected mostly by human activities. In the past century, especially the first half of the 20th century, many of the large whale species were brought to the verge of extinction due to excessive hunting by human beings. Commercial whaling has become the most dangerous threat to the ruler of the oceans (Blue Whale). Of late, Japanese Government has decided to pull herself officially out of the International Whaling Commission (IWC), and also decided to resume commercial whaling from July 1, 2019, onwards. This paper will provide an insight into the delinquent history of whaling concerning Japan. Moreover, how Japan's controversial decision that allows their fishermen to set sail and hunt whales will have negative fallout on the greatest marine mammal. Besides, what are the different threats commercial whaling pose to whales, save extermination.

**The history of commercial whaling**

The history of commercial whaling can be traced back to as early as 4 thousand years ago. The Norwegians were the first group of people hunting whales (Marrero, and Thornton). Modern commercial whaling started flourishing in the 1800s and drove many species to extinction. In the absence of proper equipment and technology, whale hunting was not considered a matter of great concern vis-à-vis the extinction or existence of whales. The advanced technology, including factory ships and grenade harpoon, opened up the door of modern whaling around 1870. Commercial whaling became a significant problem for whales from 1940 to 1950, immediately following the conclusion of World War II. Due to the shortage of food and fuel, Japan decided to hunt whales as their major resource. In the backdrop of massive hunting, whales provided almost half of all animal protein consumed by the country.

The International Whaling Commission (IWC) established in 1946 intending to stop the overhunting of whales. IWC passed a law of banning commercial whaling in 1986 to stop every member country from hunting whales for commercial purposes, such as selling for food. However, two years later, Japan started scientific research in response to a loophole in the International Whaling Commission (IWC), rules, that allows whaling to carry out scientific research. Japan exploited this loophole and continued whaling in the North Pacific and the Antarctic. Despite the widespread anger, including from their key allies like the United States, Japan continued to exploit this loophole as an excuse for whaling. Not only Japan, but there are also at least 10 countries that undertake such kind of whaling activity.

Japan is the only one with a program that goes beyond its own territorial and economic boundaries. Japan's program is also the largest and covers more oceans than any other country’s program. The intensity of Japan’s program can be well understood from the decision taken by the Japanese government to withdraw from IWC on December 26, 2018. Following the decision, Japan now hopes to see that they would be able to continue whaling in high seas and Southern Ocean sanctuary. Besides, japan also resumed whaling in Antarctica in 2015/16 owing to its declaration of being exempted from the jurisdiction of UN’s highest court. Furthermore, the hunting of dolphins also explains the intensity of their hunting of marine mammals for commercial purposes (Whaling In Japan - Whale & Dolphin Conservation USA). According to data available on Whale and Dolphin Conservation (WDC), the number of whales hunted by Japan in 2019 is staggering. 227 whales have been hunted since the start of 2019. (Whaling In Japan - Whale & Dolphin Conservation USA). Moreover, during the expedition of 2017/18 Japanese fishermen killed 181 female whales, and out of those 181, 122 were pregnant (Whaling in Japan - Whale & Dolphin Conservation USA). The number of North Atlantic right whales has dropped to 300, whereas, the number of other whales may vary from 10,000 to 90,000 (Whale Species, WWF). So, it’s quite difficult to predict the number of whales alive, if Japan hadn’t been involved in whaling. Even though IWC knows that Japan takes advantage of the language tricks of the agreement, they have done nothing to restrict Japan.

**Why the Japanese are whaling?**

Japan's withdrawal from the International Whaling Commission (IWC) will allow her to hunt whales for commercial purpose. The decision of Japan brings strong opposition and criticism from the member countries of IWC. In response to these opposing voices, Japan's retiring IWC Commissioner, Joji Morishita said, "We had no choice". He claimed that nothing was figured out over hundreds of meetings and they have failed to find any middle ground regarding the ban on commercial whaling. So, the question arises here i.e. why Japanese insist on scandalizing the global whale protection activists? First of all, the Japanese are vulnerable to food security owing to its size and history. The devastation experienced by the Japanese following the nuclear attack rendered the food insecurity in Japan. The scarcity of food following the Hiroshima and Nagasaki attack peaked the whale consumption in Japan. The years that followed the WW II, especially from the 1940s to 1970s, the Japanese were compelled to rely on whale meat for their survival. Ever since the decades following World War II, the Japanese have never slowed down on whale consumption. Whale consumption in Japan is 4,000 to 5,000 tons a year.

How much hungry Japan is for whale meat? A street survey featured on December 28, 2018, by TBS ‘Takero Morimot Standby' revealed some facts about whale consumption by Japanese. Only 33% of the respondents said, they would like to eat whale meat, while the remaining 67% were of the view that they would eat whale meat only if offered to them (Brasor, and Tsubuku). The results of the survey revealed that difference in opinion exists along the generational lines. The consumption of whale meat can easily be replaced with other types of meat or seafood. For only the older people in Japan want to eat whale meat. Besides, save whale meat, other types of meat such as beef, pork and, chicken are also available in great amount in Japanese markets. Such a great availability of other types of meat owes transition of Japan into the most vibrant economy (Brasor, and Tsubuku). Furthermore, whale meat is highly rich in mercury that can have unexpected consequences. The consequences could be worse for the women who expect a child, because mercury may cause damage to the fetus during the development of the nervous system (Graham).

Secondly, unlike most westerns, Japanese do not consider whales as a special ocean animal, in other words, whales are just bigger fish in Japanese’s eye. As Keiko Hirata, a political scientist at California State University-Northridge, notes “most Japanese lack any special love for whales and disagree with Western animal rights activists who insist on whales' rights (Philpott). By holding this point of view, the Japanese think it is hypocritical that western society defines killing whales are morally wrong, especially when Americans hunt baby cattle and Australians slaughters kangaroos. Given intense inter-ministerial rivalries in Japan, Hirata writes, “it is not likely that these bureaucratic actors would voluntarily concede one of their areas of jurisdiction” (Philpott). In short, it turns out to be a political issue and it implies that the Japanese want to maintain their political independence.

# Lastly, whaling is Japanese culture and pride and it is considered as a significant part of Japanese tradition. Therefore, attempts to stop whaling in Japan are opposed by most Japanese. According to the defenders, eating whale meat is an old and irreplaceable tradition for Japanese people and it always reminds people of the tough time. However, more than a cultural phenomenon, Japan considers whale hunting an important factor for its economy. Japanese premier supports whaling and the Japanese government has also offered subsidies on whaling. Furthermore, the comparison between whale meat and other meat in terms of economic effect is a viable answer to question i.e. why Japanese are whaling.

# The problem of commercial hunting.

Generally speaking, commercial hunting will cause some whale species extinct. The unrestrained whaling is a threat to the whale population and destroys the ocean food chain. According to a report from NBC News, a total of nearly three million whales were killed in the 20th century, a number was driven by rapid advances in hunting technology and illegal catches by nations like the Soviet Union, and the full number of whales killed maybe even higher in what researchers call "the largest hunt in human history". At the peak of the whaling, over 460,000 whales were killed in the 1950s. Albeit no whale species have entirely extinct until today, however commercial whaling will bring them on the verge of extinction. Secondly, unlike hunting huge land animals with several shots, the process of hunting whales is extremely cruel. The whalers shoot whales by a sharp, barbed harpoon which explodes the wound. Following that, the whale will be deadly injured and will struggle to breathe while gushing the blood out. As the target whale flops around, whalers will bring them close to the ship, and then wait for almost an hour until the whale is dead. Sometimes the whales would be alive after several hours, then whalers will drag them behind, and make sure they completely lose their breath. According to research by the Neuroanatomist Patrick Hof, from Mount Sinai School of Medicine, claim that like human beings whales also contain spindle cells which give them the ability to react (Ingfei). Such slaughter should never be tolerated in modern society for the sake of humanism and empathy.

**Conclusion**

Human beings have hunted whales for thousands of years, and modern whaling also began several centuries ago. During these days, millions of whales were killed by human beings with weapons. Understandably, people kill whales during the food and fuel shortage because no matter how people empathize animals, the most important goal is to make the survival possible. However, commercial whaling in the past 3 decades was off the track. Whalers hunt whales not for food and resources, rather they hunt whales for vested economic interests which they claim traditional hunting. Making other creatures suffer from pain for personal gains is cruelty. Therefore, commercial whaling should be restricted and if allowed, the number of hunted whales should not exceed what is allowed by IWC.

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