

How the Japan 'research' whaling programme could be ended through the Japanese government current review of expenditure

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The new Japanese Prime Minister has instituted a review of government spending. The review is being driven from the top by Prime Minister Hatoyama, and the Administrative Reform Minister, Yoshito Sengoku, has already indicated in media reports that its scope will be wide-ranging. It presents a significant face-saving opportunity for the new administration to cut the lethal whaling programme. The industry already runs at a loss, and its losses are set to increase despite receiving 795 million yen (\$8.8 million US dollars) in government subsidies this year alone.

Today, 9 November 2009, the committee announced which areas would be reviewed. Of the 210 programmes selected for scrutiny, two could directly impact on the whaling programme and bring it finally to an end. They are the Overseas Fishery Cooperation Foundation (OFCF) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Grant Aid programme. The OFCF is the largest financier of the Institute for Cetacean Research (ICR) – the government-funded programme that commissions the 'research' whaling fleet - and the MoFA Grant Aid is used for vote-buying at the International Whaling Commission (IWC).

The Asahi newspaper – generally considered a reliable media source - reported in 2008 that the OFCF has provided the primary funding to the ICR in the form of interest-free loans, but the ICR has been unable to pay them back in full. Asahi claims that OFCF first loaned money in 2001 – 1.2 billion yen – and the amounts have been growing yearly. In 2006, 3.6 billion yen was given, but the ICR could not repay 1 billion yen of the loan and had to make arrangements to pay it off over four years. Asahi also claims the ICR has tried to borrow money from private banks, but stopped when interest rates became too high.

Without the subsidy the ICR will be unable to support the 'research' whaling expeditions; without the 'bought' votes the recruitment of supposedly pro-whaling nations will slow and the balance of power will be more easily maintained by the conservation majority.

This is an ideal face-saving exit for the Government of Japan. While these programmes also fund other projects, cutting the 'research' whaling funding qualifies under all of the four tests published on 22 October, 2009.

1. Whether the operation is appropriate, and whether there is a need to invest government resources

The stated purpose of scientific whaling is to provide information necessary for the management of commercial whaling. But, commercial whaling is banned by the IWC and a majority of current members oppose it. It would require a 3/4 majority vote to lift the ban, which is not achievable. Also, the Japanese companies that used to do commercial whaling say they would not return to it, even if it were allowed. So, resources are being invested to pursue a goal - the resumption of the commercial whaling industry - that cannot be achieved.

2. Are the measures effective?

The vast majority of science done on whales world wide is carried out without killing them. A review of the first 18 years of Japan's Antarctic whale research project, carried out by the IWC, found that it had failed to reach a single one of its objectives despite killing 6,778 whales. Papers reporting results are rarely published in peer-reviewed journals. The resources spent are not producing results.

3. Are the measures efficient?

The main body charged with implementing the 'Research' whaling, the ICR, is unable to repay the 3.6 billion yen in operating capital borrowed interest-free from the government. The ICR survives on the proceeds of the sale of the whale meat derived from the hunting and capture of whales, as well as government subsidies, and the main causes for the current difficulties are the excess inventories of whale meat for which there is no demand and the inevitable need to reduce prices. On 6 November, the Japanese press reported the second price cut in whale meat during 2009 and quoted the ICR as saying that it wanted to produce whale meat at the cheapest price possible in order to increase demand. Due to low demand and low profitability, a resumption of commercial whaling would contribute very little to Japan's economy or food security.

4. Is it vital when compared to other operations, in terms of limited resources?

Having already clarified that the former whaling companies do not require the restart of whaling, and in a situation where the resumption of commercial whaling is not foreseeable, the importance of these operations is particularly low, generating income that is less than 10% of the domestic toothbrush manufacturing industry. Rather than promoting economic growth, it risks economic harm because of the international controversy surrounding its continuation.