

Whales and Fish

As part of its strategy to legitimise and justify a resumption of commercial whaling, the Government of Japan has raised the argument in various international fora that 'whales eat fish', which has an adverse impact on commercial fisheries and/or food security. There is no scientific basis for these claims. Blaming whales for the problems of fisheries is like blaming woodpeckers for deforestation.

The Government of Japan first raised this suggestion in 1999 by means of a 'for information' paper submitted to the Scientific Committee of the IWC. This paper contains the statement that total food consumption by whales is three to six times the world fisheries catch; a statement which has been widely quoted by supporters of whaling ever since. However, because it was 'for information' the paper was never discussed or debated by the IWC's scientists. This pattern of avoiding serious scientific discussion of these absurd claims has continued.

The IWC set up a special workshop in 2002 on the relationship between whale abundance and fisheries. Japan refused to attend; claiming that that date and location were not convenient. It is widely believed they did not attend because they expected strong criticism and were concerned they would be unable to defend their spurious claims. Indeed, of the 5000 minke whales stomachs so far 'sampled' by Japanese whalers in the Antarctic, every one has contained krill and only krill. The workshop went ahead and concluded that there is currently no suitable data or modelling approaches that could provide reliable quantitative advice on the impact of cetaceans on fisheries or of fisheries on cetaceans.

Most populations of great whales are today a small fraction of their pre-exploitation levels, due to unregulated whaling over the past 200 years. The argument that these comparatively small whale populations could impact on today's fish resources can be dismissed.

Despite this, the Government of Japan has been using unsupported figures and simplistic arguments to convince other countries (usually smaller developing nations) to support a resumption of commercial whaling. The reality is that removal of whales will not automatically result in an increase in fish catches. The oceans are not organised around simple food chains, they are organised around complex food webs. Some species of fish eaten by whales may be major predators of other commercially valuable fish. More whales may mean more fish, not less. Whales have not changed their diet in tens of millions of years; successfully co-existed alongside abundant quantities of fish and a healthy fishing industry. It is the introduction of highly technical methods of fishing that has led to exploitation by humans, which is mainly responsible for the degraded state or collapse of many commercial fisheries.

The UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation regularly assesses the state of the world's fish stocks and has found that the majority of them are showing declining yields. They concluded that fish yield could be increased by 10 million tons by reducing fishing efforts and increasing the age of fish caught (by increasing mesh sizes and closing areas used by young fish. The FAO did not suggest that removal of whales would help the recovery of over-exploited fish populations.

The answer to the deepening problem of fisheries is better regulation of fishing effort and the creation of large marine reserves where fish can recover and spread out to repopulate the areas depleted by over fishing. It does not lie with culling whales.