



5 Whalers' Myths — and the Reality

The whaling industry generally makes five main arguments in defense of itself: whales are not only not endangered, they are numerous and increasing; whales need to be “culled” to protect marine ecosystems because they eat too many fish; whaling is an essential element of their countries’ tradition and culture; that the anti-whaling countries are blocking movement forward, and; that we have learned from past mistakes. Here are some examples why those arguments are wrong.

- **Myth 1: Whales Must Be “Managed” To Protect Ecosystems Because They Are Eating Too Many Fish**

The pro-whaling forces repeatedly insist that whales eat “too many” fish and need to be controlled as part of a broader marine ecosystem management approach. The statement is unscientific and has no basis in fact:

- Many whales do not eat fish at all; indeed, most of the world’s baleen whales live in the Southern Hemisphere, where they primarily eat krill. Indeed, the stomach of virtually every whale killed in the Antarctic during Japan’s research whaling program has contained krill and nothing but krill, and yet still the Fisheries Agency of Japan continues to insist that its research program is essential for understanding “whales’ place in the ecosystem,” which is code for “proving that whales eat large amounts of fish.”
- The sizes of many whale populations today are at a small fraction of their levels in pre-whaling times when commercial fish populations were considerably larger and much healthier than they are today.
- The primary predators of fish are not whales, but other fish.
- The removal of top predators (such as cetaceans) can cause major ecosystem disturbances, with negative consequences for fisheries.
- Human overfishing (not whales) is the cause of the precipitous decline of commercial fish stocks worldwide.

- **Myth 2: Whale Populations Are Numerous and Increasing**

The whalers argue repeatedly that whale populations are numerous and increasing, and that their catches will not deplete those populations. However, these arguments are based on some doubtful science. For example:

- The website of Japan’s Institute of Cetacean Research (ICR) claims that populations of humpback and fin whales are growing by 14-16%, which the IWC’s Scientific Committee has agreed is biologically impossible.
- The Fisheries Agency of Japan repeatedly claims that the IWC Scientific Committee has agreed there are at least 760,000 minke whales in the Southern Hemisphere. But this is not true. The 760,000 figure was an estimate based on surveys completed in 1987/88 which the Scientific Committee once acknowledged was the best available at the time. Since then, more recent surveys have suggested a significantly lower abundance of

- minke whales. Indeed, the Scientific Committee agreed in 2000 that the 760,000 number was no longer appropriate. There has been no agreed population estimate since and the population may be declining.
- Proposed Japanese catches of humpback and fin whales in the Antarctic will occur in populations that are believed to be below the level at which catches would be allowed under scientific guidelines developed by the IWC. Catches of humpbacks may threaten recovery of isolated humpback populations in the Pacific as well as interfering with existing non-lethal research programs.

- **Myth 3: Whaling Is Essential For Traditional, Cultural, and Nutritional Reasons**

- Japan's whaling tradition dates back only a few centuries (roughly as long as the whaling traditions of Britain and the Netherlands), and is centered around a few coastal communities. Japan's Antarctic whaling did not begin until the 1930s, and was expanded massively following World War II at the instigation of the United States, as a means of feeding a starving population.
- Demand for whale meat in Iceland, Japan or Norway is extremely low.
- In 2006, the Norwegian government cut short the whaling season halfway through because the market for whale meat was already saturated.
- In early 2007, Greenpeace discovered that more than half the total weight of the whales killed in Iceland's 2006 commercial fin whale hunt had been discarded in a waste dump outside Reykjavik.
- Meanwhile, Japan has more than 4,000 tons of whale meat from its "scientific" whaling program in cold storage—uneaten, unsold, and unwanted.
- Few Japanese people view whales as a vital food source and even fewer actually eat them. According to an opinion poll conducted in Japan in June 2006, 69% of Japanese people do not support whaling on the high seas and 95% never or rarely eat whale meat.

- **Myth 4: The Anti-Whaling Countries Have Repeatedly Blocked Attempts to Adopt the Revised Management Procedure**

One of the most frequent claims by the FAJ, as well as by Norwegian and Icelandic whaling interests, is that non-whaling nations are obstructionist, moving goal posts and doing all they can to block "rational" management of whale populations. Specifically, they repeatedly insist that NGOs and the conservation-minded governments have stubbornly blocked the adoption of the Revised Management Procedure and Revised Management Scheme (RMP/RMS). The truth is rather different.

- The IWC adopted the RMP in principle back in 1994. The biggest obstacle to the implementation of the full Revised Management Scheme (RMS) has been the refusal by Japan and other whaling nations to accept the need for monitoring and oversight of their whaling operations, from inspectors and observers on board whaling vessels to oversight of DNA databases and trade monitoring schemes. Japan and the pro-whaling nations refuse to accept control and administrative measures that are considered routine in modern fisheries treaties.
- At the 54th IWC meeting, in Shimonoseki, Japan, Sweden introduced a proposal to adopt the RMS, which would have moved the IWC toward whaling under very strict conditions. Japan and its paid allies voted against it. Had they voted for it, it would have passed and the RMS would have been adopted five years ago.
- Norway, having found that the RMP does not provide high enough quotas for its liking, is now working to revise it. This revision is based on running simulations for 300 years and allowing higher catches in the first 100 years, which are made up for by reduced catches over the next 200 years.

Myth 5: We Have Learned From the Mistakes of the Past

Historically, large-scale management failures, overhunting and the mistake of treating marine mammals as if they were fish, lead to the massive depletion of each whale species that was commercially targeted. Those who argue for a return to commercial whaling say that the mistakes of the past will not be repeated, that the lessons have been learned. Recent evidence suggest this is not the case:

- As outlined above, pro-whalers use disputed population figures and manipulate or ignore the RMP in order to produce the highest possible hunting quotas.
- Under JARPA II, both fin and humpback whales will be targeted. Despite some recovery fin whales are still considered to be endangered, humpbacks to be vulnerable.
- In August 2006, investigations revealed that Japan had been illegally overfishing for Southern Bluefin tuna over a period of 20 years, taking 178,000 tons of tuna above what was allowed. Southern Bluefin tuna is now considered critically endangered by the IUCN.