

Frequently Asked Questions

Q1) Is “The whale” endangered?

A1) The term “The whale” is often used in the whaling argument, but to be precise, cetacean (order cetacea) contains more than 80 species of whales, dolphins and porpoises. Among them, there are some species that are still low in number such as blue whale, but there are also abundant species such as minke whale.

Whaling in Japan targets species such as minke, Bryde’s and sei whales. The examination by the International Whaling Commission (IWC) Scientific Committee and results from the scientific research conducted by Japan, it has been clarified that these whale species are abundant enough to be utilized sustainably for food.

Also, for whales that have not yet recovered enough such as blue whale, in Japan it is prohibited to harvest those endangered species by law. Japan also conducts scientific researches on abundance estimates, distribution, and stock structure of those whales proactively.

Q2) Are whales going to be overfished by the resumed whaling as was the case of the past overfishing by the global large-scale whaling?

A2) Whaling in Japan only targets whale species that have been proved to be abundant enough for sustainable use for food.

However, even if those target species are abundant, that doesn’t mean that we can catch any amount that we want. Currently, the catch limits of these whales are calculated with a strict and robust calculation method. The catch limit calculated by this method would be extremely conservative by taking into consideration every aspects other than harvesting, such as impacts of the environmental changes surrounding those target species.

Also, under a strict monitoring and control system, whalers are following the catch quotas (set within catch limits) in rigid manner, and there will be no catches exceeding the allocated catch quotas.

Q3) Since whales need a long time to mature and they only give birth to a few calves in their lifetime, would they be put at risk of unsustainability due to the impacts by whaling?

A3) In the IWC Scientific Committee, it has been shown that the numbers of many baleen whale species have been increasing by 2 to 8% each year. The catch quotas of the target species of the whaling in Japan are roughly less than 1% of the total abundance estimates which are calculated with the conservative and robust calculation method in consideration of their biological characteristics and life patterns. Also, Japan intends to conduct periodic scientific researches for the abundance estimates of target species, making it possible for the whaling to operate in a sustainable manner without giving negative impact to the whale resources.

Q4) Why does Japan continue to catch whales even though the whole world is against it?

A4) The notion of sustainable use of wild animals including whales is supported by many countries in the world. Thus, it is a misunderstanding that the whole world is against whaling. Even in the IWC, nearly half of the member countries agree to the sustainable use of whales, and many other countries that are not members of the IWC also support this notion too.

Every country or region of the world has developed and maintained its own unique food culture based on its natural surroundings, socio-cultural environment, history and other elements. As for Japan surrounded by the ocean, historically, it has been using a variety of marine living resources including whales. It is essential to mutually respect the circumstances and notion of a respective country or region when considering what they use for their food.

Meanwhile, it should be noted that, whaling takes place also in Norway and Iceland, as well as in the US and Russia in a form of aboriginal subsistence whaling.

The Fishery Agency of Japan (FAJ) is in a position that as long as:

(a) aquatic living resources (including whales) that can be used sustainably are distributed,

(b) certain demands for the use of those resources exist, and

(c) Japanese nationals wishing to engage in the harvest of those resources exist,

it would pursue the appropriate management for the fishery and the sound development of industries concerned.

Q5) Why did Japan withdraw from the IWC?

A5) The IWC has a dual mandate under the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling (ICRW), that is, conservation of whale stocks and orderly development of the whaling industry (namely sustainable use of whales). However, ever since the so-called moratorium on commercial whaling was introduced, due to various arguments by some Members on issues outside the competence of ICRW, any management measures that would ensure the proper management of whale resources has not been adopted, thus the IWC has fallen into a dysfunctional state as a resource management organization for a quite long time.

Under such situation, aiming at realizing the original objectives of the ICRW, Japan has sincerely engaged in the dialogues in the IWC for over 30 years in line with Japan's basic policy of promoting sustainable use of aquatic living resources including whales based on scientific evidence. Unfortunately, all such efforts resulted in failure and only revealed significant gaps among Members' views on whales and whaling, and the dysfunctional state of IWC has never been improved.

Given the above, at the 67th meeting of the IWC in September 2018, Japan submitted the "IWC Reform" proposal which was a renewed and compromised attempt to restore the function of the IWC by, through mutual respects, realizing a coexistence of the two groups of Members with fundamentally different views on whales and whaling.

Nevertheless, the anti-whaling group repeated their own views ignoring the sustainable use of whale resources, one of the two objectives of the ICRW, and refused to accept Japan's compromised proposal. As a consequence, it had become quite clear that it is impossible in the IWC to even seek the coexistence of Members with the two different views, "sustainable use of whales" and "protection of whales".

Consequently, in December 2018, Japan decided to withdraw from the IWC, which had never improved its dysfunctional state for over 30 years, in line with its basic policy of promoting sustainable use of aquatic living resources based on scientific evidence.

Although Japan withdrew from the ICRW, it remains committed to international cooperation for the proper management of marine living resources. Japan continues the joint research program with the IWC, i.e. IWC Pacific Ocean Whale and Ecosystem Research Programme (IWC-POWER), providing a Japanese research vessel and its crew. Japan also continues to contribute to the management of whale resources in cooperation with international organizations, such as the IWC and the North Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission (NAMMCO), through participation as an observer and provision of scientific data obtained from its own researches.

Q6) How much whale meat is supplied and consumed in Japan?

A6) The amount of whale meat supplied and consumed in Japan has been stable for the past 30 years, about 3,000 to 5,000 tonnes per year. Recently, a part of them has been imported from Norway and/or Iceland.

Q7) Is it true that recently in Japan, the number of people who have eaten whale meat is decreasing, and so is the number of people who wish to eat whale meat?

A7) The amount of whale meat consumption in Japan has been stable for the past 30 years, about 3,000~5,000 tonnes per year. As a part of them has been imported from Norway and Iceland, it can be concluded that there continues to be a certain amount of demand for whale meat in Japan.

Whale meat has been highly consumed especially in some areas such as Hokkaido, Tohoku, Shizuoka, Hokuriku, Wakayama, Kochi, Shimonoseki and Northern Kyushu, where whale cuisine has been firmly rooted as one of their food culture.

On the other hand, during the 30 years of the so-called moratorium, there was a limit in the amount of whale meat distributed in Japan, thus leading to the decrease in the distribution of whale meat in areas other than those indicated above. This could eventually lead to the increase in the number of people who failed to recognize that whale cuisine is one of Japan's food cultures.

This is quite similar to the situation of the most of "local traditional cuisines" besides seafood, which are mainly eaten in local areas, thus people who are not used to eating such local cuisines are likely to think that only a few people eat them. However, there still exists in several regions where whale cuisine is composed of one of their local traditional cuisine thus deeply rooted there as one of their food cultures. It is therefore important that we mutually understand and respect the diversity of such food cultures.

Although it is well understood that there are substantial number of people, mainly the younger generation, who have not had whale cuisine, we strongly encourage them to experience the delicious savory of whale cuisine, together with other seafood.

Q8) Is it necessary to eat whale as there are plenty of other food sources than whale?

A8) "Food" is not something that should be replaced by other plentiful sources. The diversity of what we eat really matters. Countries and regions around the world have developed and sustained their own unique food culture based on their surrounding natural, cultural and social environment, history and other elements.

Japan, a small island country surrounded by the ocean, has been historically using whales, not only for meat for food but also for oil and baleen for a variety of purposes. Utilization of whales have been nourished as their culture in various regions within the country.

Moreover, when it comes to food security, it is necessary to consider its geographical situation: a small island country centered with a long mountain range.

We can never ignore the possible threat of food security in the future caused by a shortage of food supply due to the ongoing increase of the global population and/or outbreak of pandemics on livestock.

Taking into account of such threats, it is highly important for all of us in the world to secure variety of ways for ensuring the food security in the future through maintaining the diversity of food sources, including whales.

Q9) Even if whaling is one of Japan's cultures, that cannot be a reason to rationalize its whaling activities.

A9) Being a "culture" doesn't necessarily allow any activities or actions relating to that particular culture. However as for "food culture", its diversity has to be mutually respected as long as there is enough resource that can be used sustainably, paying due consideration to its surrounding natural, cultural and social environment, history, and other elements of each country and region of the world.

In Japan, aquatic living resources including whales have been used for food from ancient times. Whaling is one of the activities for this purpose, and use of whales for food should be respected just like any other "food culture", as long as it is sustainable.

Q10) Unlike other animals, whales are special (smart/sacred) animals, and therefore we cannot kill them.

A10) Not only whales, but all living creatures have precious lives, and each of them plays its own role in the ecosystem. Of course, we human beings are a part of this ecosystem too, and like other higher trophic animals, we cannot survive without taking the lives of other living creatures.

On the other hand, we human beings often give special status to specific animals. For example, cows, which are consumed in many countries, are worshiped as a sacred animal in India. The decision of which animal to eat, or to use as a resource can differ among countries and regions, and we must understand that such differences in decisions are derived from the difference in the sense of values and/or belief.

However, we should refrain from pushing such sense of views and/or belief on a specific animal to other nationals and individuals. The important thing is that we have mutual understanding and respect for other nationals and individuals, taking into account of the natural, cultural and social environment, history and other elements of regions and countries where they have been living with.

Q11) Why does FAJ provide financial support to the whaling industry, while it is said that whaling is not economically viable without such financial support?

A11) The FAJ thinks that, like other fisheries, the resumed whaling targeting large whales should be financially stabilized based on a concept of independence and self-help efforts, under appropriate resource management.

With that in mind, and also taking into consideration that whaling targeting large whales has been ceased for more than 31 years, the FAJ has decided to provide interim support necessary for feasibility-study type operation including search for fishing grounds and renovation of whaling technologies.

Q12) Where can I purchase whale meat in Japan?

A12) For example, in this website you can search places serving whale cuisine and selling whale meat in your nearby area. (in Japanese only)

<https://www.kujira-town.jp/>

Q13) What exactly is “the quota reserved by the Government” set by the FAJ and provided in the catch quota of large whales?

A13) The quota reserved by the Government is set for an adjustment purpose, and reallocated when there is a need to adjust the allocation of catch quotas or the timing of the operation between the two different fishery types during the same fishery season. The reserved quota is set so that the total catch will not exceed the catch limit in any event.

Q14) While being said that whale and dolphin meat are contaminated with mercury, does consumption of their meat give negative impact on human beings?

A14) Meat of cetaceans which are placed in the highest trophic level in the ecosystem, especially those of toothed whales have usually higher mercury concentration than other fishes placed in lower trophic level, since they take in mercury existing in the natural environment through its food chain. However, in general, their overall mercury content is low, doing no harm to human health. On the other hand, the meat of whales and fish contains a large amount of good-quality proteins and unsaturated fatty acids which is known to be effective on preventing vascular disorders, and hence they are essential food source to live a healthy life.

The municipality of the Taiji town, Wakayama prefecture, where whale meat has been historically highly consumed, conducted a series of researches on possible health effects on their citizen caused by the mercury contained in whale meat. The researches were conducted through the analyses of hair samples and neurological testing for adults (through fiscal year of 2009~2011) and elementary school children (through the fiscal year of 2012~2017), with the cooperation of the National Institute for Minamata Disease and others. Results of the researches showed that there were no signs of health effects caused by mercury and, as a matter of fact, that in order to stay healthy it is better to eat whale meat which contains a higher amount of omega 3 polyunsaturated fatty acids.

Meanwhile, taking into account the recent report on possible effects caused by intake of low level of mercury on fetuses, the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare has released guidelines for pregnant women on fish consumption concerning mercury contamination. Please visit their website for details.

<https://www.mhlw.go.jp/topics/bukyoku/iyaku/syoku-anzen/suigin/dl/051102-1en.pdf>