

After Withdrawal from the IWC: The Future of Japanese Whaling

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Introduction

On December 26, 2018, following a cabinet meeting, the Japanese government confirmed what had been rumored for days: Japan would withdraw from the International Whaling Commission (IWC) and resume commercial whaling in July 2019. The Abe cabinet justified the decision by arguing that the IWC had “refused to agree to take any tangible steps towards reaching a common position that would ensure the sustainable management of whale resources” during the past 30 years. Even so, the government stressed that Japan “remains committed to international cooperation for the proper management of marine living resources. [...] Japan will continue to contribute to the science-based sustainable management of whale resources.”¹

One surprising consequence of Japan’s IWC withdrawal was that it would also be ceasing its controversial Antarctic scientific whaling program that had been criticized by anti-whaling non-government organizations (NGOs). Instead, all future commercial whaling operations will be conducted inside Japan’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). This step may come as a surprise to many Western observers as political scientists have almost exclusively focused on Japan’s controversial whaling program to explain why Japan would not give up whaling.²

Less well known, however, is that a handful of Japanese coastal communities have continued coastal whaling during the past 30 years despite the IWC moratorium.³ To understand the rationale of Japan not only withdrawing from the IWC but also Antarctic whaling, I argue that we have to consider the development of these so-called “whaling towns.” Having conducted fieldwork in these communities since 2015, I had the opportunity to travel to three of these communities shortly after the IWC withdrawal announcement and speak with several stakeholders. In this paper, I therefore revisit the “whaling towns” and discuss how the resumption of commercial whaling has been received by the locals.

Due to the controversial nature of the topic, I withhold the names of my informants. Furthermore, I will not take a stance for or against whaling but rather let the voices of the involved stakeholders be heard. My research shows that despite having lobbied for three decades towards this goal, many locals were completely taken by surprise by the government’s decision. While supporting the IWC withdrawal in interviews with the Japanese media, privately, many stakeholders are worried that the industry has become too small to

be revitalized.

Towards the IWC Moratorium



Traditional whaling in the Meiji period. Private collection of the author.

The history of Japanese coastal whaling extends back at least 400 years. During the early modern period, net-whaling became a middle-sized proto-industry in some fishing communities in western Japan, with the most successful whaling bases in northern Kyushu, southern Shikoku, and on the Kii peninsula around the town of Taiji. In the second half of the 19th century, the targeted whale stocks showed signs of exhaustion due to coastal over-fishing and the whaling activities of American and Britain whalers off the Japanese coast.⁴

Japanese whaling was eventually reformed after the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, when new hunting techniques and motorized vessels allowed the harvest of a larger range of whale species. Starting in the 1930s, Japanese whaling fleets joined their European counterparts in the Antarctic ocean, however, these activities ceased during the Second World War, which allowed whale stocks to recover temporarily. After the war, a group of whaling nations founded the International Whaling Commission (IWC) in 1946 to assure conservation of the remaining whale stocks to allow resumption of whaling. Japan resumed its Antarctic whaling expeditions after the Second World War to secure whale meat for its starving population and eventually joined the IWC in 1951.

During the 1960s, the IWC failed to live up to its promise to assure the recovery of whale stocks and more whales than ever were killed. Environmental groups in the United States and other Western countries began to lobby for a complete ban on whaling, arguing that whale stocks would be exterminated if this did not happen. The US gave up its own whaling program in 1971 and at the United Nations conference on the human environment in Stockholm the following year, a 10-year whaling moratorium was ratified to the horror of the Japanese delegation.

In 1982, the IWC, which comprised mainly ex-whaling nations and new member nations that had never hunted whales before, followed suit and decided on a five-year commercial whaling moratorium (a zero-catch quota) starting in 1986. The moratorium was to be reviewed in 1990 when additional data regarding the status of the whale stocks would be available. Norway filed a formal objection and was therefore not bound by the moratorium and continued whaling. Japan also filed a formal objection against this decision, but withdrew it in 1985 due to pressure from the US and ended commercial whaling at the end of 1987.⁵

Initially, the Japanese delegation worked under the assumption that the moratorium would be lifted in 1990. In 1991, however, the IWC assembly turned down a proposal for a new management procedure and Iceland left the organization in protest. The Japanese government also considered resigning from the IWC, but fearing for its international reputation, hesitated to go this far. At the same time, Japan wanted to preserve its remaining whaling industry so that it could restart commercial whaling as soon as the moratorium was lifted.

Before the moratorium, the Japanese whaling industry had consisted of three interwoven industries. The first was pelagic whaling in the Antarctic ocean, which was conducted with a whaling fleet consisting of several catcher boats and a factory ship to flense the whales onboard. The second was large-type coastal whaling (LTCW), which hunted larger cetaceans with whaling vessels larger than 50 tons. Finally, small-type coastal whaling (STCW) specialized in hunting smaller whales near the Japanese coast.

In 1987, Japan made use of Article VIII of the International Whaling Convention, which allows protected whale species to be hunted for scientific purposes and transformed its former pelagic fleet into a scientific whaling operation. A newly founded company called Kyōdō Senpaku conducted research expeditions in the name of the Institute of Cetacean Research (ICR), a semi-private institution connected to the Fishery Agency.

Kyōdō Senpaku employs 200 people and owns three catcher boats and one factory ship. It was contracted for two scientific research projects: one in the Antarctic Ocean (JARPA) and a smaller one in the North Pacific (JARPN).⁶ The official goal of these scientific missions was to assess the status of the whale stock to provide data that would lead to the moratorium being revoked. In accordance with the rules of the IWC, the meat of the captured whales was frozen and sold in Japan. Nevertheless, some members of the IWC and anti-whaling NGOs claimed that because the whale meat was sold, these programs were in fact commercial whaling disguised under a different name.⁷

While pelagic whaling was successfully transformed into a scientific whaling program, LTCW was dismantled in 1987 due to overhunting and poor demand for whale products, and the large fishing companies involved in this type of whaling were financially compensated by the Japanese government. STCW, however, is traditionally operated by residents of coastal communities who hunt whales for local consumption. Before the moratorium, they hunted around 300 common minke whales (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*) each year, as well as a small number of Baird's beaked whales (*Berardius bairdii*) and short-finned pilot whales (*Globiocephala macrorhynchus*). None of these species were considered biologically endangered.

As the IWC had been founded to manage the whale stock of large cetaceans, the small-sized Baird's beaked whales and pilot whales were both outside of the IWC's self-declared jurisdiction and therefore not covered by the moratorium. The hunt of these species is at the discretion of national governments. Minke whales, however, are a species of baleen whales and are protected by the moratorium. For STCW operators, minke whales have always been their main target as the raw meat was especially valued. After the moratorium, they continued to hunt a small number of the non-protected whale species and have since lobbied the IWC to legally resume minke whaling.

Their first attempt was at the 38th annual IWC meeting in 1986, when the Japanese delegation argued that STCW resembled aboriginal subsistence whaling, which is exempt from the moratorium. Prior to the 1988 IWC meeting, an international group of social scientists led by the anthropologist Milton Freeman conducted fieldwork in these communities to underscore the Japanese claim. In the following years, the social scientists presented their work at the IWC meetings and argued that the IWC moratorium caused social and economic hardship in these "whaling towns."

In their final report (henceforth referred to as the "Freeman report"), they concluded that

“STCW shares certain characteristics with some forms of commercial whaling [...] but also possesses several attributes in common with aboriginal subsistence whaling [...]”⁸ Therefore, STCW should be considered a distinct category of whaling and like aboriginal whaling, should not fall under the IWC moratorium. Based on this argument, the Japanese delegation repeatedly asked the IWC plenary session for an emergency quota of minke whales to reduce the STCW communities’ hardship, but they were consistently denied.⁸

Revisiting the “Whaling Towns”



Coastal communities in Japan where coastal whaling is currently conducted.

One legacy of the discussions regarding the STCW communities at the IWC was the popularization of the term “whaling town.” The Freeman report identified four STCW communities that possessed a unique “whaling culture,” defined as “the shared knowledge of whaling transmitted across generations.”¹⁰ The four communities in question were Taiji in Wakayama, Wadaura in Chiba, Ayukawa in Miyagi, and Abashiri in Hokkaido. In the Freeman report, the STCW communities were indiscriminately called “whaling towns” and “whaling communities,” translated from the Japanese “*kujira no machi*”.

Three of these communities still make active use of the term “whaling town” to attract tourists and to generate symbolic capital in Japanese politics. As the towns no longer have enough whalers to conduct coastal whaling independently, close ties between the STCW operators have formed and persisted. Currently, around 40 sailors and land crew at the whaling stations are working as coastal whalers. Considering the small size of the industry and the overall negligible demand in whale meat, one is left to wonder why the Japanese government would fight the issue so vigorously given the cost in international reputation.

In order to understand the decision of the Japanese government to not only withdraw from the IWC but also give up Antarctic whaling in exchange for coastal commercial whaling, the author revisited these whale towns 30 years after the Freeman report. How have these communities developed under the IWC moratorium and how have the locals reacted towards the news of the resumption of commercial whaling in the summer of 2019?

Taiji: The Legacy of the Cove



The Taiji Whale Museum (photo by the author).

To say that Japanese whaling has been controversial during the past three decades would be an understatement, but how have international and domestic anti-whaling movements played into the recent decision of the Japanese government to withdraw from the IWC? To answer this question, let us start with Taiji, the only whaling community widely known outside of Japan. Overlooking the picturesque Kii peninsula coastline, Taiji is perfectly located to watch migrating whales swimming along the Japanese coast. Its whaling history reaches as far back as 1606, when the first whaling group was established to hunt right whales (*Eubalaena japonica*).

In 1675, whalers from Taiji developed a new whaling technique that allowed them to trap whales between the coast and large open sea nets and capture them effectively. This technique was so successful that it spread to most whaling bases in western Japan. At the beginning of the 19th century, over 1,000 whalers were working simultaneously in Taiji. Overhunting and a tragic accident in 1878, when over 100 whalers were lost during a storm, brought an end of the large-scale net whaling activities, however.

Afterwards, Taiji whalers conducted mainly small-scale pilot whale hunting, which they continued throughout the 20th century. After 1906, many Taiji whalers went to the new whaling bases in northern Japan or worked on the pelagic whaling fleet in the Antarctic Ocean. In 1988, only two STCW whaling boats out of 33 remained (one of them was stationed in Ayukawa). In 2018, one boat and a crew of six whalers were still operating.

Since the 1960s, the town has tried to attract tourists with its whaling culture and has opened a whaling museum and many other associated attractions. In addition to pilot whaling, Taiji has also conducted dolphin hunt drives since 1969. Pilot whaling and dolphin drives are not officially regarded as STCW and are therefore under the jurisdiction of Wakayama Prefecture rather than the Japanese government. Since the early 1990s, Western environmental NGOs have heavily criticized the Japanese scientific whaling expeditions in the Antarctic and Japanese delegates at the IWC have been physically attacked. Similarly, the anti-whaling organization Sea Shepherd started to obstruct whaling operations in the Antarctic Ocean. Between 2008 and 2015, the American “Animal Planet” TV channel even produced a documentary series called “whale wars” that was filmed from the perspective of Sea Shepherd.¹¹

For a long time, the Japanese coastal whalers were not directly involved in this conflict. This changed in 2009 when the American documentary “The Cove” featured the Taiji dolphin hunt drive in an extremely critical manner.¹² After the release of the movie, dozens of Western activists traveled each year to Taiji to demand the dolphin hunts be stopped and also criticized the whaling culture of Taiji as a whole. The movie brought the controversy in the faraway Antarctic Ocean and IWC meetings directly to Japan’s mainland and put the formerly unknown “whaling towns” at the center of the media’s attention. Ishii Atsushi has argued in 2011 that many Japanese citizens were not “pro-whaling” but rather “anti-anti-whaling” because of the Western criticism that was perceived by many Japanese as unfair.¹³

Local politicians like long term mayor Sangen Kazutaka (first elected in 2004) have successfully capitalized on this sentiment and made Taiji a symbol against foreign pressure. Mayor Sangen has, for example, prevented the fusion of Taiji with neighboring towns by arguing that this is the only way its unique whaling culture can be protected. This has made Taiji the smallest municipality in Wakayama Prefecture. His position has also allowed him to establish contacts with the highest ranks of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) of Japan and even receive an audience with the Emperor.

For many of the inhabitants of Taiji, however, the price of becoming a national symbol has been high. During my fieldwork in Taiji in 2015, locals remarked that they were tired of constantly being on guard and that shopkeepers were no longer allowed to give interviews to foreigners. One resident feared that one day a fanatic from one of the opposing factions might resort to violence and endanger the well-being of his children. During my stay, I was constantly with a Japanese guide, but one evening I walked from the Taiji Whale Museum to

my hotel alone, crossing the larger of the two coves featured in the documentary. A “concerned citizen” must have seen me as soon after this, the police arrived at my hotel looking for “a suspicious foreigner.” This demonstrated how tense the atmosphere in Taiji was. In the last two years, dolphin hunting has almost completely stopped and the protests have also mostly disappeared.

After ten stressful years, Taiji was finally becoming quiet again, but then on December 26, 2018, the Japanese government officially announced that Japan would be withdrawing from the IWC. Shortly after the announcement, the ruling LDP organized a get-together for the involved congressmen in the LDP headquarter cafeteria and served deep-fried whale meat. Among the congressmen was Taiji’s mayor, Sangen. At a press conference, the mayor personally thanked LDP Secretary General Nikai Toshihiro for his support: “I’m grateful from the depth of my heart. To protect the fishermen, secretary Nikai hasn’t deviated one bit from his path. For us, he is like a God.”¹⁴

It is well-known that Secretary Nikai, who represents Wakayama Prefecture’s third district in the Lower House of the Japanese parliament, was not only a close friend of mayor Sangen but had also made it his lifework to resume commercial whaling.¹⁵ Nikai had, for example, been the driving force in making whale meat a regular menu item in the LDP cafeteria after Japan lost its whaling case before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in 2014.¹⁶

The reaction of the people of Taiji to the resumption of commercial whaling has been less enthusiastic, however. While many residents welcome the policy change, some worry about the ability of Taiji to resume large-scale whaling as only six whalers remain in the town. A former employee of the Taiji Whale Museum remarked: “I don’t think that commercial whaling will promote regional development. Can we really maintain this industry as long as there is no demand?”¹⁷ Also, after ten years of protests in the town, many locals are exhausted and do not wish to reignite the debate.¹⁸

Wadoura: Into a New Era of Commercial Whaling



Blue whale skeleton in Wadoura (photo by the author).

Taiji highlights how regional politics and culture have played a crucial role in resuming commercial whaling, but why did the government end whaling operations in the Antarctic Ocean and what does this change mean for current coastal whaling operations? To find the answers to these questions, let us travel to the Kanto region and the “whaling town” of Wadoura.

Since the 1650s, whalers have hunted Baird’s beaked whales in the southern part of the Chiba peninsula, which encircles the eastern half of Edo/Tokyo Bay. Although the main export commodity to Edo was whale oil (first used for illumination and then later also as an insecticide), whale meat was not a popular export. Instead, the meat was eaten locally and became part of the local cuisine.

In the 20th century, the whaling base moved several times, eventually moving out of the now busy Tokyo Bay to Wadoura on the Pacific side of the peninsula. Despite its geographical

proximity to the capital, it takes over three hours using local trains or buses to reach the community from downtown Tokyo. Its secluded position has so far prevented the town from being swallowed by the ever-expanding Tokyo Moloch, but the town struggles with the same problems as many other Japanese peripheral regions: depopulation, deindustrialization, and outdated infrastructure.

In 2006, Wadaura merged with six other neighboring towns to form Minami Bōsō city. To preserve the community's distinct identity, locals have recently rediscovered and reinvented their "whaling town" brand. When reaching Wadaura by train, visitors are first greeted by the skeleton of a blue whale, even though blue whales have never been hunted in the region. Almost all restaurants advertise whale meat and the most eye-catching is "*michi no eki wao*," which not only serves seven different whale dishes but also sells a large variety of whale-related products.¹⁹

Tourists are still scarce in Wadaura, however. A few dedicated whale fans occasionally drop by during the summer months to witness a now rare sight in Japan: the flensing of a whale. The small whaling station at the harbor of Wadaura belongs to Gaibō Hogeï, the only remaining whaling company in the town. Gaibō Hogeï owns a second station in Ayukawa and two whaling ships and has a crew of around 20 people. Since the moratorium came into effect in 1988, the company has ceased minke whaling and focused instead on the traditional Baird's beaked whales, killing around 26 a year in Wadaura. The second crew comes down from Ayukawa to help with the hunt and vice versa. Even though prices for whale meat have increased a little since the moratorium, 26 whales are not enough for the whalers to turn a significant profit.

Until 1999, the ICR contracted the whaling company Kyōdō Senpaku not only for the Antarctic whaling expeditions but also for the hunting of 100 minke whales in the North Pacific scientific whaling program (JARPN). When the ICR revised the North Pacific program in 2002 under JARPNII, they expanded the contract with Kyōdō Senpaku to an additional 100 sei whales (*Balaenoptera borealis*), 50 Bryde's whales (*Balaenoptera brydei*), and 10 sperm whales (*Physeter macrocephalus*). They also added another 100 minke whales to the hunt near the Japanese coast and hired the crews and ships of the four "whaling towns" STCW companies.

As the STCW operators possessed no factory ships on which the whales could be processed on the open sea, the captured whales were brought to the land whaling stations in Ayukawa and Kushiro for flensing. The involvement of the STCW whalers in the scientific whaling program provided the struggling industry with more work for the sailing and flensing teams and also allowed them to hunt 100 minke whales again each season, providing the whaling communities with fresh minke meat instead of frozen. The expansion of JARPNII was a direct consequence of the IWC's refusal to allow an emergency quota of minke whales for the STCW communities. The scientific coastal whaling program kept the STCW above water for the next few years, but it was not universally popular among the whalers.

In an interview in January 2019, the CEO of Gaibō Hogeï explained to me that for him, the transition from scientific whaling to commercial whaling was the most important aspect of the recent government decision. He stressed that scientific research was important and that he was more than willing to help the research, but that at heart, he was the owner of a company and wanted first and foremost to hunt whales and sell fresh whale meat. Scientific whaling has never been more than a temporary solution to keep the STCW companies alive.

The hunting plans of the ICR have not always matched the interests of the coastal whaling crews. In 2014, the Japanese government lost a lawsuit against Australia when the ICJ ruled that the Japanese whaling expedition in the Antarctic ocean did not fully fulfill the requirements of “scientific whaling” as defined by the IWC.²⁰ In response, the Japanese government postponed the Antarctic expedition for 2014, only to resume it one year later with a revised scientific plan that took the criticism by the ICJ into consideration.

Another consequence was that the ICR also revised JARPNII even though no lawsuit had been made against this program. From 2017 onwards, the new plan (NEWREP-NP) reduced the North Pacific whaling conducted by Kyōdō Senpaku to 43 minke whales and 134 sei whales per season. Changes were also made to the scientific coastal whaling conducted by the STCW operators. Although the number of minke whales was lowered to eighty, additional whaling stations were built in Abashiri and Hachinohe. The duration of the hunting season for scientific whaling was also extended, which interfered with the regular STCW, for example, Gaibō Hogeï’s Baird’s beaked whale hunting. Therefore, the return to commercial whaling would allow Gaibō Hogeï once more to have its own hunting schedule, without being dependent on the ICR’s scientific whaling program. The CEO of Gaibō Hogeï expects that the government will keep doing scientific research on coastal whaling vessels to guarantee a sustainable use of the whale stocks, but now the scientists will be guests on his boats and working according to his schedule.

Despite having plans to expand to minke whales, Gaibō Hogeï is currently not hiring new people as the CEO expects that the government will not increase the whale catch. Small quotas for sei whales and Bryde’s whale might be set, however. He does not expect STCW to expand significantly after the resumption of commercial whaling, but it remains possible that new players will enter the game. Kyōdō Senpaku, having lost their contracts with the ICR and no longer being able to hunt in the Antarctic ocean might restart LTCW inside the Japanese EEZ with their remaining factory ship. Also, new places on the Sea of Japan coast might enter the whaling business, giving the existing whaling companies additional competition.

I asked the whaler, why it took the Japanese government 30 years to withdraw from the IWC and restart commercial whaling. He remarked that this option has always been on the table but Japan has historically been very conscious of its public image and strongly committed to international rules. In the past two years, however, the US and some European countries have shown an increased willingness to leave international organizations when they did not operate in their countries’ interests. In this respect, Japan was just following the global trend.

I received a similar answer when I interviewed one of the scientists working with the ICR. According to him, the end of the controversial Antarctic whaling program was a way to minimize the damage to Japan’s reputation when withdrawing from the IWC by giving the anti-whaling nations what they wanted most without giving up whaling completely. From a sustainability standpoint, he explained that this is somewhat regrettable as the minke whale stocks in the Antarctic Ocean are probably more stable than those in the North Pacific. The scientist was also aware that many Western observers will now look very closely at the new coastal commercial whaling operations, therefore, it is extremely important that the scientific research continues to guarantee a sustainable use of whale stocks: “The whole world is looking at us. We cannot screw this up.”

Ayukawa: The Whales and the Tsunami



Ayukawa after the Tsunami (photo by the author).

My interview with Gaibō Hogeï showed that although the resumption of commercial whaling had been anticipated by whalers for over 30 years, it has raised many questions about the future of coastal whaling. To find out what the challenges are, I traveled to the two remaining “whaling towns” in December 2018 and January 2019 and spoke with local folklorists, ex-whalers, whale meat vendors, and guesthouse owners. In the third “whaling town” of Ayukawa, people were especially concerned about the future of coastal whaling as they linked the existence of their town with this small industry. To understand how this happened, we must rewind the clock eight years.

On March 11, 2011, Ayukawa vanished. Situated near the peak of the secluded Oshika peninsula in Miyagi Prefecture, Ayukawa was hit by the 14-meter-high tsunami that would devastate a large part of northern Japan and cause the Fukushima accident. Almost 70% of the houses were washed away and every structure in the former town center was annihilated. Thanks to the experience of the locals with tsunamis, the town of 1,400 inhabitants only had to mourn 23 victims. With the loss of infrastructure, however, most inhabitants had to resettle in temporary housing and many eventually moved away.

Like Taiji and Wadoura, Ayukawa had identified as a “whaling town,” but in only half an hour, the town lost its whaling ships, the whaling station, and even the local whale museum. Eight years later, most of the town’s houses have still not been reconstructed. The groundwork for a new harbor center with a new whale museum has barely been started. Nevertheless, only one year after the tsunami, the whaling station of the company Ayukawa Hogeï had been rebuilt and scientific and coastal whaling resumed. A year later, the surviving inhabitants resurrected the local whaling festival and have held it every year. Locals have begun to invent new whale meat recipes and to sell the meat locally and via the internet. The message is clear: “Ayukawa, as a whaling town, can only be rebuilt and we will live together with the whales.”²¹ I have argued elsewhere that despite its marginal economic status, many inhabitants of Ayukawa have inextricably linked the continued existence and rebuilding of the town with the coastal whaling operation.²²

The whaling history of Ayukawa began over 100 years ago when the first industrial whaling station was built in 1906. Afterwards, the town became the single most important whaling base in all of Japan and its population grew to 3,700 in the 1950s. The whaling industry began to decline due to a lack of demand for whale products and overhunting, however, and by 1988, the town’s population had shrunk to 2,200. In 2008, two former whaling companies merged with the new company Ayukawa Hogeï, which together with Gaibō Hogeï could hunt up to 26 Baird’s beaked whales in coastal waters. Under JARPNII, Ayukawa became a new whaling ground for scientific coastal whaling and up to 60 minke whales were flensed each year at the whaling station of Ayukawa Hogeï, accounting for about 40% of the company’s income.

After the destruction of the whaling station in 2011, the spring expedition was moved from Ayukawa to Kushiro. Ayukawa Hogeï hoped to receive emergency money from the government to rebuild its whaling station as quickly as possible, so they would not lose access to the scientific coastal whaling operation. However, journalists discovered that the

2.28 billion yen from Tōhoku Reconstruction Funds reserved for whaling was not intended to help the STCW whalers in Ayukawa, but rather to pay for protective measures against anti-whaling groups in the Antarctic Ocean. One member of the House of Representatives even suggested that the true purpose of the money was to pay the massive debt that the ICR had accumulated over the years due to its Antarctic whaling expeditions.²³

Having lost precious time because of this political scandal, Ayukawa Hogeï decided to rebuild the whaling station with its own money and in 2012, the scientific coastal whaling operation was once again conducted in Ayukawa. Since 2013, however, the whalers have struggled to find enough minke whales in the sea off Ayukawa to fulfill the government set quota. To make matters worse, most of the captured minke whales turned out to be sexually immature, indicating that the hunt was not sustainable. This was one reason why the ICR decided to open two new whaling grounds in Hachinohe and Abashiri in 2017 when introducing the new scientific whaling program NEWREP-NP. This change meant that fewer minke whales were harvested and flensed in Ayukawa and that like Gaibō Hogeï in Wadaura, the new scientific coastal whaling schedule in Hachinohe interfered with Baird's beaked whale hunting in Ayukawa.

This was the situation when the news of the IWC withdrawal reached Ayukawa. The locals I spoke with were overwhelmingly skeptical about the future of whaling and the community. For eight years, the community had struggled to regain its footing after the tsunami and keep the small whaling industry alive. Many locals had helped to organize the yearly whale festival to attract tourists, participated in planning the new harbor area, and founded start-ups selling fresh whale meat locally and online. All this work was now potentially threatened. The locals especially feared that because Ayukawa is situated in a peripheral region that is hard to reach and had recently lost most of its infrastructure and working population due to the tsunami, it would be too inconvenient a place to rebuild viable commercial whaling.

In the past, its remote location had not mattered as the sea around Ayukawa had been full of whales, but recent scientific coastal whaling expeditions have shown that this is no longer the case. Also, the current whaling station can only process whales up to eight meters long and is therefore too small should commercial whaling allow the hunt of larger whales. For the locals, it therefore seems likely that commercial whaling will move to new ports nearer to big cities. This will also mean that fresh whale meat will become more widely available and that the few remaining whale meat enthusiasts will have one reason less to travel to the faraway Ayukawa to purchase fresh whale meat. While the locals had hoped for 30 years that commercial whaling would be resumed, now that it is about to happen, many have realized that Ayukawa does no longer provide the conditions necessary for a successful commercial whaling industry.

Abashiri: From Whalers to Whale Watchers



Fried whale meat dish in Kushiro (photo by the author).

Our visit to the last “whaling town” brings us to the icy coast of the Okhotsk Sea in northeastern Hokkaido. In the summer, several whale species travel thousands of miles along the Japanese Pacific coast to reach these waters and feed on plankton and small fish. Long before the first Japanese or even Ainu reached this northern region, the indigenous Okhotsk people hunted whales here. Visitors to Abashiri, a fishing city of around 35,000

inhabitants, come mostly to sightsee at the prison museum, which preserves the original buildings of Japan's most infamous prison from the Meiji period, or watch the drift ice. Unlike the other whaling communities, walking through the city streets gives little indication that this city has a deeper connection to whales: there are no restaurants praising whale meat and no manholes with whale motifs. Only when reaching the harbor do you find whale posters, but these whales are not for eating. Instead, these posters are for the newest tourist attraction: whale watching.

Starting in 1988, whale watching has become an important tourist industry in over 30 coastal communities in Japan. In 2008, the number of whale watchers rose to 190,000 and 104 operators generated revenue of almost US\$23 million.²⁴ Interestingly, of the four "whaling towns," only Abashiri has so far engaged in whale watching. Like Ayukawa, Abashiri's industrial whaling history began in the 20th century. After the Second World War, Abashiri became an important whaling base for providing whale meat to the starving Japanese population and afterwards, the town's whalers carried out STCW in the coastal waters.

The IWC moratorium in 1988 caused a schism among the remaining whalers, with most giving up the profession and friendships breaking down. The whalers who were put out of business in 1988 either retired or switched to fishing or dolphin hunting. Around ten years ago, one of these ex-whalers purchased a new ship to participate in whale watching, which was becoming popular in Abashiri around this time. With his knowledge of whales and especially his ability to spot the animals in the water, he quickly became a successful whale watcher.

Meanwhile, two small whaling companies remained and received permission from the government to hunt one Baird's beaked whale each per year (later this was doubled to a total of four whales per year). Without a crew or even whaling vessels, these two whaling companies were dependent on the whalers from Taiji and Ayukawa and the captured whales were brought onto land using the companies' winches and a pier in the harbor. The whales were flensed side-by-side under the open sky as the former whaling station no longer existed. Both companies kept operating primarily to preserve the local whaling tradition and one recently purchased a small whaling vessel. Without a full crew, however, it is still dependent on whalers from other towns.

The situation in Abashiri changed in 2017 when the new scientific whaling program NEWREP-NP expanded its whaling operations to Abashiri. The ICR built a new whaling station and in 2017, 47 minke whales were brought onto land and flensed in Abashiri with the help of whalers from other whaling communities. Not many people in Abashiri still identify with the whaling industry, however, and the news of the IWC withdrawal has been received without great emotion. One ex-whaler I interviewed remarked that he does not see how whaling can be resumed in Abashiri without equipment, boats, or even young people willing to do the job. Even the new whaling station from the ICR is of little help as it is based on the other side of the town and has no direct access to the sea. Instead, the whales must be moved onto land at the pier where Baird's beaked whales are also flensed and then transported on trucks through the city. This can be done with the relatively small minke whales, but it is not practical with larger whale species.

Furthermore, thanks to the new whale-watching industry, the locals have a relatively good idea of the current whale stock situation and fear that species like fin whales will not last

long if hunted again for commercial whaling.²⁵ Of the four whaling communities, Abashiri certainly has the weakest connection to whaling. The social scientists involved in the Freeman report did not even visit Abashiri to conduct fieldwork, but included the town nevertheless. One inhabitant explained: “We were only called a “whaling town” because we had a whaling station at that time [in 1988]. But we haven’t really done anything related to whale tourism. There is no longer a connection between whales and the inhabitants of Abashiri, the only thing we have is the [whale watching] cruiser.” This view was confirmed by another local who added: “There is not really a relationship between the lives of humans and the whales. Sometimes we had eaten whale sashimi, but this has completely disappeared in the last ten years.”

Does this mean that the “whaling culture” in Hokkaido has been extinguished? After visiting Abashiri, I took the train south to the port city of Kushiro in southeastern Hokkaido. The city is mentioned in the Freeman report, but the social scientists did not label it a “whaling town” as there were no active whalers operating and living in the city in 1988. Interestingly, however, Kushiro is described as a “new whaling town” on the town’s website.²⁶ Indeed, in downtown Kushiro, there are countless restaurants advertising fresh whale meat outside their stores.

Kushiro has a very brief whaling history, but in April 2000, Kyōdō Senpaku started to visit the port to deliver frozen whale meat. This event was accompanied by many pro-whaling events and eventually led to the creation of a “whaling festival” that is now held every year.²⁷ Also, after 2002, Kushiro became one of the two places where the STCW companies flensed the minke whales caught for the ICR. In Kushiro, I had the opportunity to speak with the owner of a local izakaya, who not only sold whale meat dishes in his restaurant but was one of the founding members of the “Kushiro Whale Council” (*kushiro kujira kyōgikai*).²⁸ This organization not only organizes the whaling festival and promotes the consumption of whale meat, but also hosted the “Summit of Japanese Traditional Whaling Communities” (*zenkoku kujira fo-ramu*) in 2009.

The owner of the izakaya was very enthusiastic about Japan’s withdrawal from the IWC and expects that in the future, his restaurant will be able to offer many more whale species to customers. Even without active whalers, it is no question for him that Kushiro is a real “whaling town.” According to him, the biggest challenge is to convince older people that whale meat nowadays tastes much better than in the old days as only the best parts of the meat are sold and prepared at the restaurant. In recent years, more restaurants have begun to sell whale meat, experimenting with new recipes and only using high-quality parts. Whale meat may still not be widely eaten, but because of its rarity and controversial nature, it has become a delicacy for food enthusiasts. This development has been promoted by the “Kushiro Whale Council” and similar associations have formed in other coastal cities during the past 20 years.

Like Kushiro, coastal communities that had given up whaling long before the IWC moratorium, such as Hakodate, Shimonoseki, Nagato, Nagasaki, and Ikitsukishima have since branded themselves as “new whaling towns.” When visiting these towns during my fieldwork, I discovered that because there are no active whalers left in these communities, they have an especially strong nostalgic view of the coastal whaling industry, without seeing the everyday problems STCW operators face. Indeed, I believe that some of them may be likely candidates for establishing their own commercial whaling companies after the

resumption of commercial whaling.

Conclusion

Having revisited the four whaling communities, what are our conclusions? We have seen that coastal whaling has survived in these communities for 30 years, mainly because of the close cooperation between the villages based on their shared identity as “whaling towns” and because of government support in the form of scientific coastal whaling programs. While many locals in the whaling communities have long hoped that commercial whaling would someday resume, faced with the reality of the decision, their first response has been underwhelming. With only old equipment available, no capital, and only 40 whalers still active, many of whom are already past retirement age, it remains to be seen how successful the industry can be without further government support.

The return to commercial whaling will allow coastal whaling operators greater freedom, but a great expansion of the industry seems unlikely as the catch quotas set by the government will probably not change drastically. The decision to withdraw from the IWC was mainly an opportunistic call by the Japanese government at a moment when the climate in many Western nation-states was against upholding international agreements. It also had the added benefit of getting rid of Antarctic whaling, which not only swallowed massive public subsidies, as the Tōhoku Reconstruction Funds scandal had shown, but also incurred much Western criticism.

While STCW is smaller, its symbolic value is much higher as people in Japan are more emotionally attached to these communities than whaling operations in the far away Antarctic Ocean. Nevertheless, the Japanese government is still quite conscious of its public image and will set strict quotas to bolster its claim that sustainable whaling is possible. New whaling stations being built in new places is still likely, however.

It remains unclear whether the new commercial whaling industry will increase the demand for whale meat and other whale products. In the past 30 years, the pro-whaling associations have gone to great lengths to increase the marketability of whale meat, pushing the concept of “whaling towns” even outside the original four communities. Meanwhile, three of these four communities have cultivated their whaling image. Although the promotion of whale meat as a local specialty has been partly successful, acceptance of the product across Japan is yet to occur.

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Notes

¹See [Statement by Chief Cabinet Secretary](#), Dec 26, 2018.

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⁶For more information on the several scientific whaling programs, visit [the website](#) of the ICR.

⁷Robert L. Friedheim, "[Moderation in the Pursuit of Justice: Explaining Japan's Failure in the International Whaling Negotiations](#)," *Ocean Development & International Law* 27, no. 4 (1996): 349–78.

⁸Tomoya Akimichi et al., *Small-Type Coastal Whaling in Japan: Report of an International Workshop*, ed. Milton M. R. Freeman (Boreal Institute for Northern Studies, University of Alberta, 1988), 83.

⁹Masami Iwasaki-Goodman, "[An Analysis of Social and Cultural Change in Ayukawa-Hama \(Ayukawa Shore Community\)](#)" (PhD thesis, University of Alberta, Department of Anthropology, 1994), 56–61.

¹⁰Akimichi et al., *Small-Type Coastal Whaling in Japan*, 75.

¹¹Charlie Foley, "Whale Wars" (Animal Planet, 2008-2015).

¹²Louie Psihoyos, *The Cove*, Documentary (Lionsgate, 2009).

¹³Atsushi Ishii, *Kaitai shinsho "hogeï ronsō"* (Tokyo: Shinhyōron, 2011).

¹⁴See [Fnn Prime](#), Dec 26, 2018.

¹⁵See [Buzzap!](#), Dec 30, 2018.

¹⁶See [Sankei News](#), Dec 20, 2014.

¹⁷See [Mainichi Digital](#), Dec 20, 2018.

¹⁸See for example [Yahoo News](#), Dec 26, 2018; [Livedoor News](#), Dec 26, 2018.

¹⁹For more information, see [the website](#) of michi no eki wao.

²⁰Jeffrey J. Smith, "[Evolving to Conservation?: The International Court's Decision in the Australia/Japan Whaling Case](#)," *Ocean Development & International Law* 45, no. 4 (2014): 301–27.

²¹Mikio Ōshima and Seiji Ōsumi, "Ayukawa No Fukkō Ha Kujira Kara," *Ishinomakigaku*, no. 3 (2017): 30.

²²Fynn Holm, "The Whales and the Tsunami: The reconstruction and reinvention of the "whale town" Ayukawa," in *Land, Natur, Nation. Japans Regionen zwischen Idylle, Verfall und Revitalisierung*, ed. Ludgera Lewerich; Theresa Sieland and Timo Thelen (Düsseldorf: Düsseldorf University Press, 2019), in print.

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²⁶See [the website](#) of the city of Kushiro.

²⁷Jun Morikawa, *Whaling in Japan : Power, Politics and Diplomacy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 69.

²⁸See [the website](#) of kushiro kujira kyōgikai.

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