

Commentary

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Some thoughts about the Institute of Cetacean Research

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After the establishment of the International Whaling Commission (IWC) moratorium on commercial whaling and the following start of Japan's whale research program in the Antarctic Ocean (the JARPA program), the Institute of Cetacean Research (ICR) became the focus of attention and repeated publicity stunts by protest extremist groups reacting to the lethal component, one of many elements forming part of the research program. Over the years, that undeserved attention mainly aimed to diminish the importance and significance of ICR research activities, was often accompanied by seemingly endless hype directed to an uninformed public and stirred up in great part by western mainstream media. An often-seen cliché was the allegation that, in spite of long years of research activities in the Antarctic, the ICR had only managed to produce a single scientific publication. Apparently, all that criticism was just a flank of a nefarious, systematic and sustained effort deployed over the years by a huge variety of actors to isolate and stigmatize Japan for its whaling policies, as exposed in detail in a paper titled "*International pressure and Japanese withdrawal from the International Whaling Commission: when shaming fails*" (Kolmaš, 2020). In fact, the ICR's research programs have produced a large amount of scientific information required for conservation and management of large whales (see list of peer-reviewed publications in this issue).

Since the 2019 resumption of commercial whaling following its withdrawal from the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling (ICRW), most of that cacophony has subsided. For a brief time soon after this decision was taken by the Government of Japan, the ICR got a few calls and email queries from the general public and the media wanting to know whether ICR's role and reason to exist had abruptly come to an end. Although some pundits may disagree, the scientific data produced over the years through ICR research programs and Japan's contribution have been and continues to be of paramount importance to part of the work and discussions of the IWC and other international organizations. Soon after Japan's expression of intention to withdraw

from the ICRW, the IWC unequivocally stated that 'for many years Japan has played an active and integral role in both the Commission and its Scientific Committee' (IWC, 2019). So, the answer to those queries is no, the role and mission of ICR presumably will continue as far as Japan remains committed to the realization of sustainable use of whale resources.

Japan withdrew from the ICRW in 2019 after careful considering that the IWC had walked away from its original objective of promoting sustainable use of whale resources, namely maintaining a commercial whaling moratorium without any scientific justification. Enacted in 1972, the U.S. Marine Mammal Protection Act (MPA), 'is celebrating this year 50 years of marine mammal science, conservation, and recovery' (NOAA, 2022a). The MPA was coincidentally created the same year when, according to mainstream media, a recommendation for a 10-year moratorium on commercial whaling was approved overwhelmingly at the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm (New York Times, 1972). Ten years later, the IWC decided that there should be a pause (a zero-quota regulation) in commercial hunting on all species and populations of whales from the 1985/1986 season onwards. This purportedly temporary pause, which became to be known as the IWC commercial whaling moratorium didn't last for 10 years as originally intended, and, although it went remarkably unnoticed by the media, in July 2022 a few anti-whaling groups celebrated in Brighton, UK, its 40th anniversary. Brighton was the venue of the 34th IWC Annual Meeting where the principal stated goal of the United States was to gain an indefinite moratorium on commercial killing of whales.

This outcome was summarized as the conservationist countries achieving an outstanding victory for whale protection, although they had yet to close the book on the history of commercial whaling (U.S. GPO, 1982). Another, less often quoted, major achievement by the United States at that meeting was the IWC's agreement to create a new management scheme for aboriginal/subsistence

whaling. This decision established a Technical Subcommittee to consider subsistence, nutritional and cultural requirements of aboriginal peoples and advise the Committee in much the same way as the Scientific Committee does (U.S. GPO, 1982).

It is noteworthy that in spite of the 40-year-old moratorium, commercial whaling, an economic activity not much different from other fisheries, is now being conducted sustainably by two IWC member countries (Norway and Iceland) and one ex-member country (Japan) (IWC, 2022). Remarkably enough, consumption for food of some 87 species of cetaceans and other marine mammals has been reported in at least 114 countries (Robards and Reeves, 2011), while the UN Organization for Food and Agriculture (FAO) has yet to include marine mammals as a source of food in its statistics and reports (FAO, 2022).

Current sustainable whaling does not produce a negative effect on the exploited stocks. Meanwhile, due to different causes other than whaling, at present two iconic cetacean species, the North Atlantic right whale (*Eubalaena glacialis*) (NOAA, 2022b) and the vaquita (*Phocoena sinus*) (CEMDA, 2021) are facing imminent extinction. Further, more than 500,000 cetaceans are being killed worldwide annually, by fishing gear bycatch and other human activities (FAO, 2021).

The ICR 1987 inception as a general incorporated foundation came as a direct result of the moratorium establishment. However, the history of our institution goes further back in time: ICR is, in reality, older than the 40-year IWC moratorium. The introduction of the moratorium brought an abrupt halt to Japan's commercial coastal and high seas whaling. The 1987 reorganization of our institution was a direct result of the moratorium establishment and the proactive measures by Japan to undertake a research program in the Antarctic to systematically collect scientific data necessary for the resumption of that activity, ideally under the aegis of the IWC.

Harking back to the time when Japan's whaling in the Antarctic resumed after the WWII, a firsthand witness wrote the following: '*A unique thing is happening in Japan today. (...) Their islands do not have space to devote to growing food for domestic animals. Hence their meat must come largely from the sea. (...) When General MacArthur authorized two whaling fleets to operate in Antarctic waters during 1946–47, he undoubtedly expected objections to be raised by competitor whaling nations. But his reason was partly humanitarian. Japan needed the proteins and fats (...) of whale meat and blubber. (...) No one can deny that Japan utilizes the whale more than other nations do—they actually eat the*

meat and blubber, which is more than anyone else does, except the Eskimos.' (McCracken, 1948). It seems several countries protested then against Japan's vessels going to the Antarctic, because of the postwar turmoil and political situation. The ICR's origins go back to such times. The Institute was born at a time of need for food, while the world's whaling industry was competing for increasingly dwindling resources. Whaling was for oil as a resource, but some countries, as is the case today, were pursuing this activity for food. Such was the case of Japan then, as it is now.

What was then the need for establishing an institution specialized in whale research, several decades before the moratorium? The parent institution, or the originator of ICR was the Nakabe Institute of Science, founded in 1941. In 1942 it became an incorporated foundation with the first approval from the Planning Agency. After the end of the war, the facilities and researchers of the Nakabe Institute of Science had not been dispersed and were still available. According to one of the founders, if there had been no war, the Nakabe Institute of Science would have continued to exist and perform the activities of its future successor, the Whales Research Institute (WRI) (Maruyama, 1959).

In 1946, the year following the end of WWII, with the momentum of two of the three authorized whaling fleets actually going out to the Southern Ocean to help overcome the food shortage, a plan was made to establish an institution specializing in whale research, and on August 20, 1947, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry Order No. 22-4014 authorized the establishment of the WRI (Ikeda, 1988). Ever since, until the 1987 inception of the present ICR, our institution was a rare, world-renowned private biological research institute in the fishery industry, with an already long history of 40 years and outstanding scientific achievements contributing to cetology and whale resource management worldwide (Ikeda, 1988). Without taking account of this historical fact, criticism against ICR scientific activities would lack solid ground. The charter of the WRI emphasized the importance of the whaling industry, the efficiency of whale fishing and processing technology, and the necessity of thorough utilization of whale products. It called for the expansion of research and the implementation of systematic and comprehensive research on whale stocks, and the application of the results for the public benefit (Ikeda, 1988), while the stated purpose of establishment of ICR is 'to contribute to the proper management and utilization of fishery resources by conducting research on cetaceans and other marine mammals, as well as studies on related

international matters.’

One may argue that the prestige gained then by the WRI and later ICR, was due in part to the long-year prolific inventive and strenuous efforts of its outstanding researchers, but it is also due to the fact that since its origins, the institute has had an established system to reach out and publicize its activities. The publication of the *Geiken Tsushin* newsletter continues even today, and was planned at the same time as the publication of the English-language *The Scientific Reports of the Whales Research Institute (SRWRI)*, first published in 1948 (Maruyama, 1959). Although the SRWRI journal had to be discontinued when the moratorium introduction made mandatory for all ICR research staff to apply and devote themselves to scientific production oriented to discussions at the IWC Scientific Committee, the edition of the now five-year old *Technical Reports of the Institute of Cetacean Research (TEREP-ICR)* may be considered part of these agelong efforts to reach both to the public and scholars.

While institutional introspection is always necessary, in particular for a highly specialized and small organization as the ICR, perhaps a renewed appraisal about the institute’s nature, its background, origins and achievements thus far, is in order. Hopefully more and more people would understand better Japan’s attitude towards whales and whaling, and perhaps bear in mind the unchanging importance, both domestic and international, of the present and future role of our institute.

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