

Japan v. the Whales

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Japanese confrontations with Greenpeace protesters

Environmentalists protesting against Japanese whaling in the Antarctic is leading to an escalation of aggression from the Japanese whaling fleet. However, Japan can hardly ignore international opinion.

Japan v the Whales

The latest conflict between protesters and Japanese whaling vessels occurred on January 15 when a grenade-tipped harpoon was fired near Greenpeace activists off Mawson Coast, part of the Australian Antarctic Territory.

The incident occurred as Japan pursues its policy of 'scientific research' by hunting minke whales. Critics, including Greenpeace, say that no new knowledge is gained by killing whales, and that the 'scientific research' is an excuse for ordinary commercial whaling, with the whale meat being sold at high prices in Japanese restaurants.

This seems to be implicitly acknowledged by the Japanese themselves, with government websites citing the number of minke whales in existence as a justification for their policies, rather than the need for accumulating scientific knowledge.

The harpoon from a Japanese whaling ship landed just ahead of a Greenpeace inflatable, killing its target. Canadian activist Texas Joe Constantine became entangled in the harpoon line and was thrown into the bloodied waters near to the freshly killed minke whale. The incident occurred in polar waters about 2000 nautical miles south-west of the Australian city of Perth.

Greenpeace expedition leader Shane Rattenbury said that despite the man falling into icy waters, he was wearing a polar survival suit and was unharmed.

"Before this happened, we had prevented them from killing this whale for about an hour," said Rattenbury. "I think tensions have been rising across the last few weeks and the fleet is frustrated at not getting clear shots at their targets [because of our intervention]."

At the time of writing, the Greenpeace campaign is in its 25th day of direct contact with the whaling fleet. This is seen as an enormous success, as in previous campaigns the larger and faster Japanese ships have been able to outrun protest ships after a few days.

The harpooning incident on January 15 follows an earlier ramming by the whaling fleet. According to the Greenpeace International website, its ship Arctic Sunrise was deliberately rammed and damaged by the factory ship of the Japanese whaling fleet, Nisshin Maru, on 8 January 2006. The Nisshin Maru is at least twice as long and six times heavier than the Arctic Sunrise.

Rattenbury said, "There is no way to describe this as anything but a deliberate ramming which

placed the safety of our ship and the lives of our crew in severe danger."

The ramming was in apparent retaliation for the painting of slogans on the side of the Japanese ship. As the protesters were painting graffiti from small inflatables, no danger was posed to the large Japanese ship. However, the Nisshin Maru turned hard and then sailed for over half a mile at, and then hitting, the Greenpeace vessel.

This seemed to be an escalation of Japanese aggression following yet another incident on December 21 when the Japanese whaling vessel, the Kyo Maru, collided with the Greenpeace ship, Esperanza. The Japanese Institute for Cetacean Research dismissed the incident as minor, saying that "the same thing occurred five years ago when in 1999 another collision occurred between Japan's research vessels and a Greenpeace vessel".

However, the benign wording of the Institute's statement disguises the fact that the 1999 collision was later found to be the fault of the Japanese, and was officially record as such in the Lloyd's Maritime database.

Greenpeace is campaigning for a network of marine reserves or parks covering 40% of the world's oceans in order to protect ocean life from further destruction so as to allow the world's oceans to recover from past exploitation.

Another environmentalist group, Sea Shepherd, also with a presence in the area where Japan is whaling announced that it will escalate its campaign against the Japanese fleet. Sea Shepherd's founder, Paul Watson, demanded on January 13 that the Australian and New Zealand governments take legal action to stop Japan's 'scientific' whale haul. If legal action were taken, he said, Sea Shepherd would withdraw from the Antarctic waters. Watson has been involved in the sinking of eight whaling ships over the past 30 years and attempted to foul the propellers of one of the Japanese whaling ships, Nisshin Maru, last week.

Watson has accused the Australian and New Zealand governments of 'kissing the rear end' of Japan, which he says is violating international law, including the laws of the International Whaling Commission, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species and the Antarctic Treaty. This has been denied by the Japanese government.

Although the official English-language website of Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs remains silent on confrontations occurring at the other end of the world, it can't be anything but concerned over a public opinion backlash.

Japan receives on-going criticism over politicians visiting the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo, which honors Japanese war dead, including war criminals from World War II. Although not a dominant world issue, such visits create enormous tension in China, which is becoming economically more important to the Japanese economy. Some observers note that the Chinese government is all too willing to inflame tensions with Japan as a way of deflecting domestic dissatisfaction with the Chinese Community Party's continuing monopoly of political power.

Japan is also keen to cultivate its international image as Tokyo is being upstaged as an important regional city by the upcoming Beijing Olympics in 2008 and as Japan is halfway through its project to quadruple foreign direct investment to 26.4 trillion yen in the 10-year period 2001-2011.

The Greenpeace vessels currently dogging the Japanese whaling fleet include 70 crew from 19 countries, including the UK, Netherlands, Canada, Australia, Ghana, Russia, Norway, Denmark,

USA, France, Italy, Japan, Ireland, India, New Zealand, Spain, Sweden, Austria and Argentina.

A weblog (with photos and video) of crew members on board ships belonging to Greenpeace and Sea Shepherd recording their contact with the Japanese whaling fleet can be found at

<http://weblog.greenpeace.org/oceandefenders> and
http://www.seashepherd.org/whales/blog/whales_blog_001.html

[Written 16 January 2006.] Dale Mills is a regular contributor to Australia's Green Left Weekly
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Cleaves Alternative News. <http://cleaves.lingama.net/news/story-156.html>