

Whaling: Good for the World, the Nation, and You

Nathan Hopson

Abstract: *This article explores the evolving rhetoric of commercial whaling advocates in Japan and Norway, who frame whaling as essential for global, national, and personal health. I show that proponents leverage sustainability discourse and health narratives to present whaling as beneficial for marine ecosystems, national food security, and individual well-being. By coopting the language of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and casting whaling as “healthy,” the whaling industry and its backers challenge the anti-whaling hegemony, portraying it as irrational and unscientific. While the alleged environmental benefits of whaling have been significant to the rhetorical arsenal of the industry since at least the 1990s, a growing emphasis on the personal health benefits of whalemeat suggests the opening of a new front in struggles to influence public opinion.*

Keywords: *Whaling, Health, Sustainability, Food security, Discourse*

Introduction

“How can anyone take a stand against health? What could be wrong with health? Shouldn’t we be for health?”

Thus opens the edited volume, *Against Health: How Health Became the New Morality* (2010, 1). While the book offers insightful and cogent critiques “against health,” in this article I want to return to the commonsense rhetorical value of these provocations—How *can* anyone be against health? How can you oppose *my* health?—and consider the implications of labeling a practice “healthy.” In this case, the practice is whaling.

For decades now, Japanese and Norwegian whaling advocates have constructed their discourse around two levels of “health”: global/environmental and national. Whaling, they contend, is good—even necessary—for responsible marine resource management. In other words, the industry keeps the oceans “healthy.” Rhetorically, this argument that whaling is environmentally “healthy” is founded on the principles of rational, scientific resource usage and ecosystem balance. Opposition, it follows, has been led by “irrational,” “unscientific,” and “emotional” Westerners (ABEMA Prime 2024). Especially since the 2015 adoption of the United Nations’ 17 Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, n.d.), whaling industry backers have incorporated sustainability, sustainable development, and the language and iconography of the SDGs themselves directly into their arguments.

Whaling is good for individual nations, continues the argument. No country can be healthy without guaranteed access to adequate supplies of healthy, affordable food.¹ Whaling is necessary for the food security of countries such as Japan and Norway unable to survive on domestic food production alone. The same applies to developing nations—especially those referred to as “low-income food-deficit countries (LIFDCs)” in the technical literature—and even more so with climate change threatening local and global food production and distribution systems. Denying these nations access to whaling is denying their sovereignty and national health. This will lead

¹ The definition of food security currently used internationally rests on four pillars: availability, stability, access, and usability. The last encompasses the clean water, sanitation, and healthcare required in addition to adequate nutrition in order to meet physiological needs (de Oliveira Veras, Parenti, and Neiva 2020, 1).

to famines, lost opportunities, and more environmentally disastrous livestock farming and consumption.

To these arguments, the whaling industry and its backers have recently added a third level of health: personal health. The claim here is that whale is a low-fat, high-protein, immunity-boosting food suitable for weight and stress management, lifestyle-related disease prevention, improved athletic performance, and more. At this early stage, it appears that the personal health benefits of whale-eating are front and center in the Japanese market in a way they are not in the Norwegian. This likely reflects a combination of market, cultural, and legal factors around food and supplement marketing at least as much as it does any doubts about the supposed health upsides of whale consumption. This requires additional research.

Regardless, in summary, the adoption of a holistic “whaling is healthy” (or “whaling as healthy”) discourse reframes whaling as a net positive for individuals, nations, and the world rather than as a negative for Japan in particular, especially in the ongoing backlash against Japanese whaling practices inspired by the 2009 Hollywood “documentary,” *The Cove*, among others (Holm 2019). It also casts Japan, the whaling nation most in the international spotlight and with the largest bullhorn, as the hero of a scientific and rational approach to solving problems of environmental protection, resource management, hunger and nutrition, and so on. While it is also the official position of the Norwegian government (2023) that “Norwegian whaling is sustainable and legal [and] based on scientific criteria,” it is likely the case that defenders of this position in Japan take a certain glee in the “Uno-Reverse” discursive inversion of tired Orientalist stereotypes in support of Japanese political, economic, and soft-power aims.

In fact, this script-flipping is part of a much longer game played by anti-anti-whaling businesses, politicians, and other whaling proponents coopting and repurposing anti-whaling discourse. In Charlotte Epstein’s (2008, 231) words, the anti-anti-whaling

side “embraced the anti-whaling states’ own strategy of inscribing their discourses within broader meta-narratives and drawing on the play of positionings that occurs in other discursive fields.” Initially, the anti-whaling movement defined both regulation and discourse around whaling. Anti-whaling discourse began with the discursive construction of whales as exceptional and endangered animals. Science, as an “authoritative discourse on truth” was subsequently mobilized to further anti-whaling discourses (2008, 20, 220–23). The discourse of “sovereignty” (coded positive) became a leverage point for anti-anti-whaling actors who coopted the language and its power. This occurred specifically around articulations of political and cultural sovereignty, security, and “rational, science-based utilization.” Each of these concepts has a positive valence in the international discourses of and surrounding anti-whaling, so this reversal is a rhetorical triumph that challenges the logical and moral consistency of the anti-whaling movement. In other contexts, this sort of thing has been called “semantic infiltration, the process whereby language does the dirty work of politics” (Herbert Schmertz, quoted in Supran and Oreskes 2021, 711). Appropriating the loaded language of virtue is a key strategy of public affairs at worst neutralizing your opponent’s rhetoric, at best performing linguistic jujitsu, and often just “flooding the zone” enough to muddy the waters (Chesney and Citron 2018; Ulu-soy et al. 2021; Kang and Sheen 2024).

In this article, after briefly explaining why a comparative analysis of Japanese and Norwegian whaling discourse is useful, I sketch out some ways that whaling has been marketed by both Japan and Norway as healthy for the oceans and nations since 2015, with specific reference to coopting the SDGs. Then, I examine the emerging discourse of whaling as healthy for *individuals* in Japan, though I speculate that this new strategy will spread over time. In doing so, I avoid taking a stance on the ontological, scientific, or other claims of either whaling’s proponents or opponents. My purpose is to build on Epstein’s research to understand how the discourse and rhetoric around whaling has changed in recent

years, not to support a particular position within the debate. Overall, I argue that the three-tiered, unified messaging identifying whaling with “health” is noteworthy because, as I asked at the outset, “How can anyone take a stand against health? What could be wrong with health? Shouldn’t we be for health?” In other words, if whaling is “healthy,” or at least if it becomes difficult for a sizable plurality of people to conclusively state that it is not, the whaling industry and its allies benefit from at least the dilution and weakening of the hegemonic anti-whaling public opinion.

Why Norway and Japan?

Norway, Japan, and Iceland are the only three nations with commercial whaling industries. Norway has been a member of the International Whaling Commission (IWC) since 1960. Japan was a member 1951–2019. Iceland joined the IWC in 2022 after a three-decade hiatus. Iceland’s whaling industry has dwindled to just a single company, Hvalur. With no real domestic market, despite a resumption of exports to Japan in 2023 and renewal of Hvalur’s licensure in 2024, the future of whaling in Iceland is far from clear (Imaizumi 2023; Lukiv 2024). Moreover, Iceland has been largely on the sidelines of discourses about whaling, both as protagonist and antagonist. For these reasons, it is excluded from this analysis. In contrast, Norway and Japan have consistently been at the center of international discourses about whaling for many years and there is no sign that this will change anytime soon. Neither does it seem likely that the significant annual whale harvests in both countries will slow down. If anything, recent years suggest the opposite. Norway catches over 500 minke whales annually. Some of this meat is sold on to Japan. In 2020, for instance, 220 of the 533 total tons of harvested meat were sold to Japan, far more than the 164 that found its way to shops and restaurants in-country (Skjelvik 2021). Japan resumed commercial whaling after withdrawing from the IWC in 2019. Shimonoseki-based Kyōdō Senpaku, Japan’s largest whaling concern, launched whalemeat vending machines in 2023 and a brand-

new 9300-ton flagship in 2024 to capitalize on this opportunity (*Shokuhin Sangyō Shinbunsha Nyūsu Web* 2023; Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai 2024).

Continued large-scale whaling—whether classified as scientific or commercial—has been a public relations problem for Norway and Japan since the IWC moratorium on commercial whaling was adopted in 1982 and implemented in 1986. Both countries lodged a formal objection at the time releasing them from compliance. Japan, however, withdrew this objection in 1987, preferring at least the appearance of working within the rules-based international order represented by the IWC (Burgess 2016). This contrasts (rhetorically) with the unilateral Norwegian resumption of explicitly commercial whaling in 1993, but Japanese “scientific” whaling was always seen by critics as a way to circumvent its treaty obligations. Since then, both countries have struggled to justify their whaling industries. From this struggle emerged consistent messaging, particularly around the idea that whaling is a rational and sustainable use of marine resources (Fullem 1995; McNeill 2007). In recent years, this shared messaging has grown and transformed such that it is now possible to identify a three-part discourse associating whaling with the “health” of the planet and its oceans, sovereign nations, and individuals.

Global-Environmental Health

The idea of “science-based, sustainable” whaling as a part of overall marine resource usage and management is not new. Its emergence as a rhetorical device stretches back at least to the International Conference on the Sustainable Contribution of Fisheries to Food Security in Kyoto (1995) organized by the Japanese government and Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), which affirmed the need for responsible fisheries development and management. Thereafter, this idea became a permanent feature of advocacy for whaling, which was positioned as simply a normal and integral part of a responsible fisheries industry (Tamura 2003; Diaz 2004; see also Barclay and Epstein 2013). Since the

Act for Ensuring Sustainable Use of Whales was passed in 2017, it became law, policy, and a frequently repeated mantra in Japan (*Geirui no jizokuteki na riyō no kakuho ni kansuru hōritsu* 2017; *Geirui no Jizokuteki na Riyō no Kakuho no Arikata ni kansuru Kentōkai* 2023). The timing of this law, two years after the SDGs were created, is probably not coincidental. The SDGs established sustainable development as a new discursive paradigm for addressing “poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation,” and so on, for “a better and more sustainable future for all.” Since then, Japanese and Norwegian whaling supporters have tailored their messaging around this new paradigm.

For example, kujiraniku.com, the Japanese subsidiary of Norway’s Myklebust Hvalprodukter uses the SDGs framework and iconography in press releases and promotions (kujiraniku.com 2019; Myklebust Japan 2019). Norwegian parent company Myklebust (2017) emphasizes its efforts to make use of the entire animal as meat in the Norwegian and Japanese markets and as ingredients for health and wellness dietary supplements for both people and pets. This is not just true for individual companies; Norsk Hval (2021a), a Norwegian whaling industry association, promotes whale consumption as “sustainable.” Indeed, sustainability is itself “why we should eat more whale.”

In other words, the argument is that whaling is a sustainable, ergo virtuous, practice. The language of environmentalism and social justice, once the purview of whaling’s opponents, is used to reposition whaling as a responsible, even necessary industry. Myklebust Japan (2019) claims that developing whale products and promoting whaling regions contributes to Target 8.5, “full and productive employment and decent work” with equal pay and that dissemination of information about whaling cultures reduces stigmatization and prejudice, contributing to Goal 10.2, “social, economic and political inclusion.” Scientific harvest by small, mostly family-owned whaling concerns is in line, continues the website, with Targets 14b and 14.4, to provide

resource and market access to “artisanal fishers” and “regulate harvesting and end overfishing [and] produce maximum sustainable yield,” respectively. Similar assertions of sustainability are made in Norwegian fishing industry publications (Bjørge and Winsnes 2022; Hopmark 2023; Nordbø 2023), for example, though direct appeals to the SDGs lexicon and iconography are not as prominent.

Similarly, the Japan Whaling Association produced a series of YouTube videos in 2022 whose titles are all some variation of “Eat whale to contribute to marine SDGs!” This includes an animated version pitched to schoolchildren (Nihon Hogeï Kyōkai 2022b). Other JWA videos also sprinkle in references to SDGs, sometimes, in case the point was not sufficiently clear, with the added context of reference to Yagi Keiko’s *Behind the Cove*, an anti-anti-whaling riposte to *The Cove* (Nihon Hogeï Kyōkai 2020). The argument goes even further in other Association videos (2022a; 2022b): it is in fact irresponsible *not* to continue whaling. This position is built on the foundation laid decades ago (e.g. Tamura and Ohsumi 2000) that whaling maintains the balance of the marine ecosystem. Whales are profligate overconsumers who threaten the oceans’ sustainability. To the question, “Who’s eating all the fish?” (Swartz and Pauly 2008), whaling’s answer is: whales. It is most definitely not the rapidly expanding global fishing industry. Rather, just the 300-or-so whales harvested by Japan from three species of rorquals in 2022 (Sei, Bryde’s, and minke) would have eaten a whopping 60,000 tons of sea life. In other words, that year’s harvest “protected 60,000 tons of marine resources,” evidence that “whaling preserves the balance of the marine ecosystem,” contributing to Goal 14 of the SDGs and to the health of the planet (Nihon Hogeï Kyōkai 2022b).

National Health and Food Security

Whaling is not just good (“healthy”) for the planet. It is also good for the nation. Food security has been a serious concern for Japan throughout its modern history. Norway also struggles with food

self-sufficiency. Protein is a significant concern for Japan. Industry backers assert that coastal whaling in particular is a critical hedge against high-impact low-probability (HILP) events such as food blockades, market collapses, or other crises unexpectedly cutting Japan off from food imports. Like the argument that whaling is necessary for the health of the oceans, the messaging is remarkably consistent. Commercial interests such as Japan's largest whaling concern, Kyōdō Senpaku (2023), unsurprisingly use the language of self-sufficiency and food security to justify the continuation of whaling. Politicians and ministers from the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) promote this view in press conferences and traditional and online media junkets (ABEMA Prime 2024; Sankei Shinbun 2024). Morishita Jōji (2022; 2023), a former Japanese IWC representative with a long career in food policy and academia, recently argued that whalemeat should be part of a strategy to diversify Japan's protein self-sufficiency away from overreliance on domesticated terrestrial animals. Industrial agriculture is vulnerable not just to disease outbreaks such as BSE, foot-and-mouth disease, and avian flu, but also to the effects of pandemics and wars, as demonstrated by covid and the war in Ukraine, for example. Moreover, meat production is environmentally unsound, a problem exacerbated by food mileage, since most of Japan's meat supply is imported. Near-coastal so-called "small-type coastal whaling" (*engan kogata hōgei*) has none of these disadvantages.²

Moreover, it is an oft-repeated talking point that, with the world's population nearing ten billion, failure to adopt "science-based, sustainable" whaling will lead to increased malnutrition, famine, and so on, especially in the developing world (Diaz 2004; Kita 2008, 22–25; Suisanchō 2017, sec. 1.1.1). This position appears to be gaining support in Africa and the Caribbean, as evidenced by a draft resolution on food security (IWC/68/8.2/01) introduced by Ghana, Cambodia, The Gambia, the Republic of Guinea, and Antigua and Barbuda to the 68th Meet-

² This position (e.g. Yagi 2019) assumes a world in which Japan might be cut off from food but not from the petroleum to fuel its fishing and whaling fleets. This may reflect a misappropriation of rhetoric crafted in Norway, a major petroleum producer.

ing of the IWC (2022). Not incidentally, Norway was one of the resolution's supporters, along with Benin, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Kiribati, Liberia, St. Lucia, Morocco, and the Solomon Islands. Other than Norway, none of these sponsoring and supporting nations are engaged in commercial whaling. All, however, are island or coastal lands with low food self-sufficiency. Whether or not backroom politicking or a shared sense of resentment vis-à-vis cultural or economic imperialism were at work, it is not difficult to see the appeal of SDG 14, namely to "sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development," and, in accordance with this goal, to pursue "the sustainable use of marine living resources, including whales" to ensure a secure food supply, and with it "preservation of cultural identity and security of livelihoods" (2024, 2). This resolution was scheduled for debate at the IWC's next biennial meeting in Lima, September 2024, but was "withdrawn for further discussion in [the] intersessional period" (International Whaling Commission 2024) leading up to IWC70.

Personal Health

In addition to being healthy for the planet and the nation-states of the world, whale is healthy for the individual. This is the new argument being made in Japan, and to a lesser extent in Norway, to encourage individuals to consume whale products and also, I argue, to make that choice harder to critique. After all, "How can anyone take a stand against health? What could be wrong with health?" If environmental and national health claims about whaling frame personal consumption choices as consonant with enlightened self-interest, whale's health benefits appeal to more *banal* self-interest.

Whalemeat is, nutritionally, described by its purveyors as surf-and-turf-in-one: high in protein, low in fat and cholesterol, rich in collagen, and with the healthy omega fatty acids found in fish.³ This has been the basis for industry claims that eating whale instead of meat can lower the risk of hypertension,

³ It is also sometimes described as hypoallergenic, at least compared with meat (Okuno Suisan 2023).

myocardial infarction, and adult-onset diabetes; and improve cognitive function. These assertions are boilerplate for whaling’s backers in both Norway and Japan (Kyōdō Senpaku 2020; Merkevareforeningen for Norsk Hval 2021b; iTromsø 2023; kujiraniku.com 2024).

However, Japan and Norway part ways here, at least for now, in one interesting way. Japan’s whaling industry has made far more aggressive and stronger claims for the health benefits of balenine. Balenine is an imidazole dipeptide described by the industry as the secret of the great whales’ tireless global circumnavigation. This has led to advertising promoting balenine’s alleged anti-fatigue and recovery-promoting properties for humans, too—some specifically for athletic performance, others generalized to the overworked “salaryman” and “office lady (OL).”⁴ This is a relatively recent development. A dozen years ago, a popular science article (*Nikkei Herusu* 2012) expounded on the benefits for “tired women” of a range of imidazole dipeptides in tuna, bonito, migratory birds, *and* whales. This is quite different from the more recent trend of promoting whale balenine specifically and exclusively, which seems to have its roots around this same time. References to balenine began appearing in Fisheries Agency white papers that year (2012, 124), and with concentrated promotion, balenine has become a top selling point for whalemeat in the intervening years, as illustrated by the Japan Whaling Association’s use of Barenin-chan (fig. 1) as a promotional mascot.

The Japan Whaling Association has advertised the health benefits of balenine since at least its 2018 annual “factbook” on whaling, which was almost entirely devoted to the topic (Nihon Hogeï Kyōkai 2018). Around the same time, videos extolling balenine began to appear on YouTube (Mame Chishiki Channeru 2019). While it does not appear that social media has become a particularly successful marketing channel for balenine, a small number of can now be found on other platforms such as Instagram, X, Facebook, and TikTok. Early videos were

⁴ Laboratory studies of balenine’s effects have produced mixed results (Yang et al. 2022; de Jager et al. 2023).



Fig. 1: Barenin-chan

mostly industry produced. More recently, influencers have joined the fray. There are also industry-influencer collaborations portraying whalemeat as part of a high-performance, healthy diet for athletes (Kujira Japan 2023). The Kujira Town website (2019) features a series of interviews with athletes, nutritionists, and others extolling the positive effects of whalemeat on athletic performance. Rajikku (2018), another online whale product retailer, headlines its website, “Recommended for athletes and those pursuing beauty,” a recommendation it supports with charts of data on the balenine content of whale and favorable comparisons of whale’s macronutrient and fatty acid content to beef, pork, and chicken.

And if *your* health, beauty, and work and athletic performance are not enough motivation to consume whale, the whaling industry would like to remind you that whale fed a generation of children after World War II, fending off starvation and producing the strong, healthy, productive workers who resurrected Japan. Whale, as one retailer (Okuno Suisan 2023) puts it, is “a superfood indispensable for children, too,” and must return to school lunches for the health of future generations. This return to whale in the command economy of the school lunch program

is, this argument continues, in line with the government's post-2005 "food and nutrition education" (*shokuiku*) policy teaching "proper" eating habits for lifelong health.⁵

Concluding Remarks

As I suggested at the beginning of this article, this three-part "whaling is healthy, whaling is good" discourse reframes whaling as a net positive for individuals, nations, and the world rather than as a negative for whaling nations. There are certainly counterclaims questioning or outright denying the "healthiness" of whaling, some of which come from within the whaling nations themselves. Among the most obvious are the concerns raised by scientists, activists, and government health authorities about the high levels of neurotoxic methylmercury (MeHg) in some cetaceans.⁶ In a sense, this actually supports my central argument that the veracity of arguments about whaling as "healthy" is less important than their framing and resultant resonance or emotional plausibility (Hopson 2017, 66). We backfill and retcon and use motivated reasoning not to come to conclusions, but to justify the conclusions we've already reached. It helps, though, when you can feel good about them, and this narrative of health may go a long way here. At the very least, the new claim that whale is healthy for individuals adds an additional layer to the structural script-flipping backlash politics of anti-anti-whaling that Epstein analyzed. That layer is founded on the broadly shared value of an individual's right to health, which may make it an effective weapon in the ongoing battles over whaling's future.

⁵ On *shokuiku*, see, for example, Kimura (2011), Yotova (2016), Assmann (Assmann 2017).

⁶ There is a decades-long debate on the subject, fueled by data collected from areas of high whale consumption such as Taiji, Wakayama (Taijichō, n.d.; Endo and Haraguchi 2010; Nakamura et al. 2014) and the Faroe Islands (Weihe and Joensen 2012; Mathisen 2014), and predictable clashes between locals and activists (Tromsø 2023; Martinsen and Maria 2024), and in Japan, at least, resulting mostly in cautious recommendations from national and local governments that perinatal women limit consumption of toothed-whale products (Suisanchō, n.d.; Kōseirōdōshō Shokuhin Hokenbu 2003; Kōseirōdōshō Iyaku Shokuhinkyoku Shokuhin Anzenbu Kijun Shinsaka 2005).

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About the Author

Nathan Hopson is an associate professor at the University of Bergen, Norway. His research focuses on the social history of nutrition science in modern and contemporary Japan and whaling discourses in Japan and Norway.