

Japan's Whale Food Culture: A Culinary Heritage at a Crossroads



Source: Pixabay (2020)

Background

Once an important source of protein—contributing to about 45% of the country's total meat consumption in the post-WWII years—whale meat still holds great significance in Japanese food culture today, especially in areas where whaling has traditionally been conducted (ICR, 2007).

The origins of Japan's commercial whaling can be traced back to the Meiji Restoration, about 400 years ago (ICR, 2007). It was not until the late 1950s, when Japan joined the International Whaling Commission (IWC) and other proteins such as beef and chicken became more widely available, that hunting activities and demand for whale meat finally declined (Reuters, 2019). Despite pledging to cease all commercial whaling activities under a moratorium signed by IWC members, Japan never fully stopped hunting. In 2018, following a scandal that exposed the country for evading IWC regulations and hunting whales for the past 30 years under the guise of scientific research, Japan declared its exit from the IWC and resumed commercial whaling activities in its own waters (BBC, 2018).

Although domestic demand for whale meat has significantly decreased over the years—with consumption dropping from 233,000 tonnes in 1962 to less than 3,000 tonnes in recent years—the Japanese government insists that the hunt must go on, citing its significance in Japan's culinary history and culture (SCMP, 2024). In an effort to safeguard the survival of the whaling industry, the Japanese government has not only generously subsidized local whaling businesses, but also added fin whales—the second-largest animal on Earth—to its commercial hunting list (The Standard, 2024).

On the other hand, in hopes of driving up demand and normalizing its consumption among younger generations, whale meat has been served at public exhibitions, in school lunchboxes, and through vending machines across the country (SCMP, 2024). Furthermore, in collaboration with the whaling industry, the Japan Travel Bureau is targeting tourists by inviting social media influencers to promote the unique culinary experience as part of Japan's cultural heritage,

aiming to reshape perceptions and encourage both locals and foreigners to embrace it (The Guardian, 2023).

Challenges

In its attempt to preserve whale food culture, Japan is facing overwhelming international criticism, particularly over its violation of IWC regulations and the expansion of its commercial catch list. Japan should remain vigilant in the face of potential political or economic repercussions in the future. At the same time, journals have highlighted the difficulty of promoting something so strongly opposed almost everywhere except in commercial whaling countries (The Japan Times, 2024). Moreover, the promotion of whale food culture outside of Japan becomes even more difficult when demand and consumption within the domestic market remain at low levels (The Guardian, 2023).

Discussion Questions

1. What were the main reasons for Japan's exit from the International Whaling Commission?
2. What political or economic consequences could Japan face for continuing commercial whaling?
3. What ethical considerations are involved in the debate over whaling?
4. How might Japan balance cultural preservation with international environmental concerns?

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Keywords

- Food and Beverage
- Whale consumption
- Japanese food culture
- Cultural significance
- Market demand
- Preservation