



July 2001

Norwegian whaling - an export driven industry

Norway resumed commercial whaling in 1993 despite the fact that the International Whaling Commission (IWC) moratorium on all commercial whaling had been in effect since 1986. The political party in government in Norway at the time took the decision in order to stem the decline in its popularity with voters in northern Norway. It was able to do so because Norway lodged an objection to the IWC's moratorium decision in 1982 and so is not technically bound by it.

Since 1993, the Norwegian authorities have been at great pains to portray their whaling as a traditional activity of very small scale, catching only minke whales, with the purpose of fulfilling local needs. In fact, Norway's minke hunt did not start until 1930 after numbers of other, larger whale species had already been massively reduced. The hunt was subject to weak regulations that did little to restrict operations. No catch quotas were set until 1975, more than forty years after this hunt had begun. Allocation of quotas to individual whaling vessels were not given until 1984, only two years before the IWC moratorium came into force and only at the insistence of the IWC.

As minke whales became scarce around the main hunting area of the Lofoten Islands, Norwegian whalers began to travel further away in search of whales. By the mid 1980s some of the most productive whaling grounds were off Russia not Norway. On average, 2000 minke whales were killed by Norwegian whalers in the North-East Atlantic between 1930 and 1980 - a level of hunting which was to halve the original population.

The revival of the whaling industry in Norway since 1993 has been driven by the possibility of resuming the international trade in whale products and supplying whale meat and blubber to the highly lucrative Japanese market. Norway's domestic market for whale meat is already saturated and there is no market at all for whale blubber. In Japan, however, there is still a demand for whale products to supply a luxury market. On average, a kilo of whale meat sells in Japan for 17 USD, three times the Norwegian price. However, the finest quality raw whale meat may fetch as much as 800 USD a kilogram (£285 a pound) in Tokyo's best department stores ('The Times' 14 September 2000). Unlike in Norway, whale blubber is also considered a delicacy in Japan where it is eaten as 'whale bacon'.

Norwegian whalers frequently call for increased quotas and for the hunt to be expanded to other species including the much larger fin whale. As one whaler explained to the Norwegian press, "It is not the sale of whale meat in Norway that brings the big money, but export to Japan. Everyone agrees that when the export ban is lifted, the ones allowed to catch whales will be sitting on a gold mine".

This potentially lucrative market led the Norwegian government, within a year of resuming commercial whaling, to begin pressing the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) to lift its ban on international trade in whale products. Despite the fact that CITES has consistently rejected Norway's proposal to remove the ban, the Norwegian Government took the unilateral decision to resume export on January 16th 2001. The reaction to this from the head of the whalers' public relations group was: "This is the final victory in the whaling debate."

Once again, the decision by Norway is technically legal because Norway, like Japan, has a reservation to the decision to list the minke whales on Appendix 1, which prohibits international trade. Under the terms of CITES, Norway is not legally bound to the listing of minke whales on Appendix 1. However, Norway's decision sends a clear message of non co-operation to an international body and

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undermines its effectiveness. If all countries were to follow Norway's example there would be no controls on the international trade in wildlife whatsoever.

Resumed export is likely to threaten more whales than the ones that migrate past Norway. There are currently no legal international shipments of whale meat. Once Norway re-establishes this lucrative trade, it will provide cover for the products of pirate whalers who catch all species, even the most endangered. This is a real threat - even in the absence of such trade, protected species show up regularly on the Japanese market.

A recent survey conducted by the Institute of Cetacean Research (the Japanese agency which manages Japan's so-called 'scientific' whaling) discovered that 3.3% of the samples it tested turned out to be from banned species, including fin and humpback whales ('Reuters News Service' 20 December 2000). Most disturbingly, however, was the recent discovery of gray whale products, probably from the western North Pacific population, one the rarest whales in the world.

Norway has even portrayed whaling as a point of principle. The Director General of Norway's Fisheries Ministry was quoted in the 'Financial Times' in May, 2001 as saying: "It's neither the money nor the tradition. The main reason why we continue is a basic principle for marine resource management."

But of course the minke whales of the North-East Atlantic do not belong to Norway. They are highly migratory and do not belong to any nation. For Norway to say that its management principles allow it to flout an international management regime sets a very low standard for the behaviour of nations.