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MELBOURNE

Published on *Up Close* (<http://upclose.unimelb.edu.au>)

Episode 60: Harpooning the Myths: Japan and Whaling

Harpooning the Myths: Japan and Whaling

VOICEOVER

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JENNIFER COOK

Hello, and welcome to Up Close, Melbourne University Australia. I'm Jennifer Cook. In this episode we're hoping to separate fact from fiction in what is one of the most emotionally charged topics facing the global community. I'm talking about the whaling industry.

In January 2006, Greenpeace activists used whale carcasses to spell out the words Help End Whaling and Sea Shepherd protestors have taken to boarding Japanese whaling ships on the high seas to save the world's largest mammal from what they see as a cruel and unnecessary death. But while no one seems to believe Japan's claims that it hunts around 1000 minke whales each year for scientific research and most people agree the sight of a slaughtered whale is abhorrent, it seems the whaling issue is way down with myth making on both sides of the debate.

Prepare to relearn what you thought you knew about whaling. Perhaps you thought whale meat was an intrinsic part of Japan's diet and culture or that Japan was whaling in Australian waters, or they're violating the whale sanctuary established by the International Whaling Commission. As Dr Charles Schencking, a senior lecturer at Asia Institute and the School of Historical Studies at Melbourne University tells Up Close none of these often accepted facts are true and the real story is far more intriguing.

Charles, if you could begin with taking us through some of the history of Japanese whaling.

CHARLES SCHENCKING

Thank you very much, Jennifer.

In the earliest history we'll have to go back to archaeological records and earliest history would show that many of the indigenous communities in northern Japan -

particularly the island of Hokkaido, and these are the Ainu people ? they actually ate whale, and this goes back 2000 maybe 3000 years, but this certainly isn't going out to sea, harvesting the whales. This is eating whales that have primarily beached themselves or who are very close in harbours.

Now we also have historical records, written records, of whale being consumed in Japan from the 10th century on, and we have records of whales actually being harpooned by hand in the 12th century. These are all primarily still localised. It's all within very close coastal waters. Whaling really takes place, if you want to talk about the Antarctic whaling, for the very first time in 1934.

JENNIFER COOK

It was that late.

CHARLES SCHENCKING

It was that late. 1934 is actually the first Antarctic mission that Japan undertakes. Whaling in the 1930s was done almost exclusively for oil not for food, and they would use oil, and sell it on the open market, primarily to the British Empire and then also to Nazi Germany, as a way of getting cash.

JENNIFER COOK

I see, so it wasn't for food?

CHARLES SCHENCKING

Primarily it was not for food. We start to see the percentage of food with the total whale catch around 1939 and 1940 being about seven or eight per cent of the whale product. This was used primarily for military rations. Whaling as a national food, if you want to consider national cuisine, really doesn't take place until the post-war years.

JENNIFER COOK

Why is that?

CHARLES SCHENCKING

Japan was starving. The Americans, the allied powers, had pretty much destroyed Japan's economy, most of its urban areas and when they were responsible for running the Occupation they realised that malnutrition was at extraordinary high levels. In 1946 an Occupation report suggested that urban people in the major cities of Japan were near the danger point of mass starvation. The easy answer, or the most economical answer, was to start whaling for food. America, Australia, Britain didn't want to be in the position of exporting protein to Japan during the Occupation. There were some suggestions that America and Australia could export beef to Japan but this was too expensive and the Occupation officials believed that commencement of whaling, for food this time, would be the easiest way to deal with this protein deficit.

JENNIFER COOK

Now, there was another problem of that, wasn't there, that caused some concerns

with Australia, the thought of Japan whaling and getting their ships going. Could you tell us a bit about that?

CHARLES SCHENCKING

Absolutely. In 1946 when the Japanese Antarctic fleet sails down to Antarctica waters they collect about 1200 minke whales. They go back to Japan. The meat is sold. The next year there's plans for an even larger catch of whales, 1947. The Occupation authorities realise this is a great way to supply very cheaply to the Japanese. Well, in June of 1947 when the allied Occupation officials are about to issue permits for Japan to whale again, the Australian Government protest. They protest vociferously, and it is because they do not want Japanese vessels in close proximity to Australia, they don't want them in the Pacific again and they think this is just going to be a ruse for the Japanese to develop a maritime industry, and potentially, a navy again. So they tell the Americans that they will happily whale on behalf of the Japanese. All of the meat product that is gathered will be sent to Japan. Australia will keep the oil because they can export the oil.

JENNIFER COOK

Of course.

CHARLES SCHENCKING

But the condition is that America has to supply the vessels and America has to supply the fuel to run the vessels. Of course the American Occupation officials they say, no, we're just going to have the Japanese whale.

JENNIFER COOK

Yes.

CHARLES SCHENCKING

They went through great elaborate steps, putting US Army officers on board these whaling ships. They basically said that they couldn't come within any land mass, which is Australia or New Zealand, even if it was a medical emergency. It was very, very strict about what they could and couldn't do.

JENNIFER COOK

Well, incredible concerns and fears?

CHARLES SCHENCKING

Absolutely.

JENNIFER COOK

?following post-war.

CHARLES SCHENCKING

Absolutely.

JENNIFER COOK

Perhaps if you can tell us how Japan's whaling industry did compare with other countries in that time.

CHARLES SCHENCKING

Well, in the post-war world there were primarily four countries that were heavily involved in whaling: Soviet Union, Japan, the British Empire and Norway. Japan was a very big player in the 1950s and '60s, and if we actually look at the Japanese diet in the 1950s and '60s, even after the Occupation ended, whale was a very high percentage of protein. In fact, just over half of the animal protein eaten by all the Japanese between 1945 and 1965 was whale meat. This was done primarily in school lunches?

JENNIFER COOK

School lunches.

CHARLES SCHENCKING

School lunches.

JENNIFER COOK

It's a bit of a development on the 'You will have a carton of milk'.

CHARLES SCHENCKING

That's right. School lunches: Occupation officials in 1946 realised that so many students were malnourished that this was actually impinging on their learning ability, and they implemented a school lunch program. Whale when it first actually re-entered into the Japanese diet in 1946, '47 was met with a bit of apathy; even though they were hungry, whale always had a very, very bad connotation: very stinky, very strong flavoured, very unpleasant. So one way to inculcate a society with this was to put it into school lunches. Factory cafeterias also had a lot of whale: whale in curry, whale in burgers, deep fried whale nuggets

If we look at some women's magazines in the 1950s, and also newspapers ran recipes and stories about how to prepare whale so that it would taste like other meats, and primarily beef. I've got a quote here from Kaneda Takahashi in the journal *Eiryoo To Ryoori*, which is *Nutrition in Food*, and the quote is 'a time may yet come when we can eat delicious beef in abundance. Until that time think of whale as being a stopgap to help us live.' That was in 1953.

JENNIFER COOK

There were never any claims that it tasted like chicken?

CHARLES SCHENCKING

I don't think there were any claims it tasted like chicken. It was still a very, very strong flavoured meat and if we go back even further into the 16th and 17th centuries we will see recipes of whale in coastal villages. It was always you have to mask the strong flavour with ginger or soya sauce, or even garlic.

But by 1973, '74 as Japan becomes more and more wealthy the percentage of people who actually eat whale in Japan diminishes greatly, whereas between '45

and 65 it's half of the animal protein. By 1973 it's six per cent of the total animal protein being consumed in Japan.

JENNIFER COOK

You're listening to Up Close. I'm Jennifer Cook and I'm talking with Charles Schencking about the muddy waters surrounding the whaling debate. So Charles, let's turn now to claims that Japan won't give up whaling in modern day times as it provides a smoke screen to hide other controversial fishing activities, such as yellow fin tuna.

CHARLES SCHENCKING

I'm not certain about the reasons why or the smoke-screen argument. I've heard it made that Japan continues to whale so that all the flak and all the attention will be drawn towards whaling, but I think you see more and more people talking about over-fishing of all fish in the Pacific, so I don't think there's a smoking gun here in this argument.

JENNIFER COOK

It's really interesting now, because we're moving our focus to the myths that the outside world has been looking at Japan and whaling. So let's talk first of all about one of the big issues that is always flagged for us: Australia's claim that Japan is whaling in their waters.

CHARLES SCHENCKING

Absolute myth.

JENNIFER COOK

Absolute myth?

CHARLES SCHENCKING

Absolute myth. In 1994 the Australian Government placed a 200-mile Economic Exclusive Zone off their pre-existing claim to Antarctica. This action in 1994 is a clear violation of the Antarctic Treaty, signed in 1959 and ratified in 1961. Australia's a signatory to this treaty. Australia can think and they can claim that it was their water, but we know that in international law lots of countries may claim many things. I mean, Taiwan still claims that it is China, and about 20 countries recognise Taiwan as China. That doesn't mean it's China.

JENNIFER COOK

So let's get that very clear. I mean, Australia does have a part of Antarctica

CHARLES SCHENCKING

Yes.

JENNIFER COOK

That's ours. But then you're saying on top of that we're looking at our claim saying, well, we've have another 200?

CHARLES SCHENCKING

?miles Economic Exclusive Zone of waters.

JENNIFER COOK

Because we think we can.

CHARLES SCHENCKING

Yeah, because we think we can. But the reality is in 1959 when the Antarctic Treaty was signed it put in abeyance any existing claims in Antarctica. It said that we're not going to challenge them, we're not going to affirm them, but one thing that was very, very clear in article four of the Antarctic Convention is that no further territorial claims were made on Antarctica. The 1994 extension of this 200 mile Economic Exclusive Zone is a new claim.

JENNIFER COOK

So then when you get organisations like Sea Shepherd going in and actually boarding Japanese whaling ships, claiming that they're doing what the Australian Government would do anyway, so does that make those groups akin to pirates?

CHARLES SCHENCKING

The legal definition of piracy is very hard to nail down. If they are attempting to sabotage a ship on the high seas or to capture a ship on the high seas, of course, then they would be considered pirates. The claim that they're doing something that the Australian Government should do is ridiculous because the Australian Government, if they intervened and stopped whaling on the grounds that this is their waters, I'm sure Japan would immediately take it to the International Court of Justice. And for all intents and purposes Australia would likely lose.

JENNIFER COOK

And it's such an emotional issue, isn't it, you know, to see these people on a ship protesting and coming between the Japanese whaling ships and the whales.

CHARLES SCHENCKING

They can certainly place themselves between harpoons and whales and the whaling ships. I mean, that would be something that they would be able to do under international law, but actually boarding a ship or ramming a ship, that is piracy.

JENNIFER COOK

In 1946 the International Whaling Commission was set up to preserve whale stocks and in '94 two whale sanctuaries were created, one in Antarctic waters and another in the Indian Ocean. So this brings me to another claim that Japan is illegally whaling within protective waters. Can you elaborate on that?

CHARLES SCHENCKING

Yeah, this comes to the heart of whether Japan is whaling for scientific purposes or for commercial purposes, because the way the International Whaling Commission has defined these whale sanctuaries is that in the Indian Ocean and in the Antarctic

sanctuaries no country can commercially whale. Now the International Whaling Commission allows member nations to whale for scientific purposes in whale sanctuaries anywhere in the world, and that is how Japan is able to whale in a whale sanctuary.

JENNIFER COOK

Now, this is where people get incredibly angry, because they don't believe that this is scientific research. They're basically just whaling and using the scientific research?

CHARLES SCHENCKING

As cover.

JENNIFER COOK

As a guise, as a cover. What do you say to that?

CHARLES SCHENCKING

That is a very valid argument, and I think that we're talking about a legal issue here. Legally, Japan is allowed to conduct this whaling. Now it's a stretch to say that there's a lot of scientific research being done on all these whales. There has been claims that you could conduct scientific research on whales without killing them. Strictly, though, back to legality, Japan is allowed and it's within its legal rights to whale.

JENNIFER COOK

So why doesn't Japan just whale commercially and be done with those transparent attempts in scientific research? Why don't they just do what Norway does and get on and commercially whale?

CHARLES SCHENCKING

It's a very good point. Norway does whale commercially. They harvest around 800 minke whales a year in their waters. Now, if Japan really wanted to whale commercially that's what they would have to do: they'd have to leave the IWC, they'd have to say that we no longer abide by the IWC and we're going to whale. They don't because I think they're able to whale how they want to whale within the rules of the IWC. So why would you want to leave the IWC, start commercial whaling and all of the international protests that would now fall on Japan without any way to cover themselves under the pretext of scientific covering. So it would be insane for Japan to withdraw and whale commercially.

JENNIFER COOK

Which brings us back to the IWC. Why don't they change the law?

CHARLES SCHENCKING

Well, to change the law you need a 75% vote in the IWC. There's currently 82 members, and it would be very, very difficult to change the law with the membership. Also, the IWC allows member nations to issue permits to their own people to whale

scientifically, so it's not as if the IWC is issuing permits for Japan to scientifically whale. The IWC in the finest legal sense allows Japan to issue permits itself.

JENNIFER COOK

You're listening to Up Close. I'm Jennifer Cook and I'm talking with Charles Schencking about the history of the whaling debate.

So look, if you could take us back a little bit, Charles, and if you could explain the role the US played?

CHARLES SCHENCKING

Yes.

JENNIFER COOK

With Japan signing a very important treaty, wasn't it?

CHARLES SCHENCKING

That's right. In the 1960s and 1970s around the world there began a strong anti-whaling movement, because up until 1986 countries could still whale commercially, and countries such as the Soviet Union, Norway, Japan, the British Empire whaled. Australia whaled up until 1978. A strong conservationist movement took place in the 1960s and '70s to outlaw commercial whaling and the US actually took a very important lead role in this position. In 1982 the IWC voted to end commercial whaling. They voted that in 1986 commercial whaling would no longer be legal anywhere in the world. Now immediately, four countries put objections to this law. One was the Soviet Union, another was Japan, another was Peru, and another was Norway. Now eventually, Japan withdraws its objection and it does so entirely because of intense political and economic pressure from the United States, and it really goes back to two amendments that were passed in America regulating the trade laws that are the general agreement in trades and tariffs.

Now these domestic laws basically stated that if any country is deemed to have diminished the effectiveness of the IWC in their conservation efforts the United States could either, A, put sanctions on these countries or, B, they could restrict that country's fishing rights in US territorial waters. Japan in 1984 was allocated 900,000 tonnes of fish in American waters in their 200-mile Economic Exclusive Zone. So the Japanese had to weigh up do we continue whaling and lose access to 900,000 tonnes of fishing in American waters, and the obvious answer for Japan was, oh, we'll give up whaling.

JENNIFER COOK

Yes, we'll take the better tasting fish?

CHARLES SCHENCKING

Absolutely. We'll take the better tasting fish, we'll take much greater quantities of it and we'll continue.

JENNIFER COOK

And improve relations with the US.

CHARLES SCHENCKING

Absolutely. So in 1986 Japan announces that they will stop whaling commercially in 1988 and for two years Japan does not conduct whaling, either scientifically or for commercial reasons. But one of the great problems is that conservation groups also began in the 1980s to say, look, we're over-fishing in the Pacific, we're over-fishing in US waters and, slowly ? should say actually quite abruptly between 1984 and 1988 ? the US eliminated all foreign rights to fish in US waters.

So we go from Japan being able to take 900,000 tonnes of fish in US waters in 1984 to zero in 1988 and, lo and behold, the next year Japan issues permits for scientific whaling.

JENNIFER COOK

Yes, they were left high and dry, weren't they?

CHARLES SCHENCKING

So we can see that this whaling issue really skirts international politics, environmentalism and maritime history, all three of these.

JENNIFER COOK

And national pride.

CHARLES SCHENCKING

Absolutely national pride.

JENNIFER COOK

It's just so intriguing, isn't it? It's just such an interesting multi-layered issue that's so much bigger than just, oh look, there's a whale, it deserves to live.

CHARLES SCHENCKING

Absolutely, it is. It's really one of the most emotive issues that is so wrapped up in mythology and myth and misunderstanding on all sides of the equation. I think that we often lose sight of the legality, we often lose sight of the history and I think it's very important to look at what actually is legal, what is the historical claim and try to demythologise this issue of whaling.

JENNIFER COOK

Well, I thank you for an enlightening and thought-provoking discussion.

CHARLES SCHENCKING

You're very welcome and thank you for inviting me here today.

JENNIFER COOK

I'm Jennifer Cook and my guest at Melbourne University Up Close has been Dr Charles Schencking from Asia Institute and School of Historical Studies at Melbourne University.

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