

**Counting the Blessings of Whales:
Insights from a Chopsticks-wielding Patriot**

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Introduction

When asked about recent whale-related topics, many think of attacks launched by the so-called Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, an anti-whaling organization, against research vessels on their way to whaling areas and debates between pro- and anti-whaling countries at meetings of the International Whaling Commission. Among the younger generation, a large number may have no interest at all in whales.

However, whales have been and will continue to be important animals integral to the Japanese people and this is because whales have helped us since ancient times and the Japanese have greatly and deeply loved whales. This, however, leads to criticism: “Did you hear yourself? The Japanese once overhunted whales, disturbing the marine ecosystem, and drove whales to the edge of extinction. How can you say that the Japanese love them?”

In fact, the purpose of this book, which I have written, is to respond to criticisms like this and to make known to everybody that the Japanese truly love whales.

Incidentally, I got a real feel for how the Japanese still open their hearts to whales when, for example, I take taxis and talk to the driver in their 40s or older about whales.

All I need to do is to say a few words to the driver: “Sir, have you ever eaten whale meat?” As soon as I ask, the driver, no matter how uncommunicative he has been up to that point, will respond positively, almost turning his head.

“Oh, whale meat, I used to eat a lot!” “I loved it *tatsuta*-fried!” “In school meals in our day, we...” The conversation would go on and on and the ride to the destination would be occupied by whale topics. In my experience, 100 out of 100 taxi drivers are responsive to whale topics.

This is because they have either had the real experience of enjoying the taste of whale meat or the feeling of well-being after eating whale meat. As you may know, during the 20-year period after 1945, or the postwar period when obtaining food was extremely difficult, whale meat was served in school meals quite often because it was very nutritious.

I am from that generation and, when I remember whale meat dishes, such as *tatsuta* fried whale meat cutlets, whale meat curry and whale meat sukiyaki, my mouth starts to water. Those were dishes that I could eat every single day without feeling sick.

Japanese schoolchildren were very pleased with the good taste of whale meat that was served in school

meals, and, at the same time, their physical health was greatly improved. In those days in Japan, there were many undernourished children across the country but whale meat as a source of animal protein in school meals was a significant contribution that improved their physical health.

In those days, I often ate fish from the fishing port of Onahama (currently Onahama, Iwaki City) in Fukushima Prefecture. Whales were also frequently brought there and I ate whale meat almost every day. Naturally, whale meat was eaten often at home, in addition to as school meals. During the 20 years after 1945, whale meat sometimes accounted for as much as nearly 50% of the animal protein consumed by the Japanese (in 1947, for example, the supply of whale meat constituted 48% of all animal protein). This coincided with the period when the Japanese grew in population, rose from defeat and reconstructed Japan.

It is no exaggeration to say that nutritious whale meat provided the Japanese with energy during those days and enabled the Japanese to keep up with and join the family of advanced nations at an astonishing speed.

However, this was not the only time when whales helped the Japanese. Since the distant past, the whales have assisted the Japanese through their long history.

Archaeological findings have shown that the Japanese have eaten whale meat about 9,000 years ago. They ate whale meat that washed up on beaches and used the bones and baleens as well. Protein and fat, which are sources of energy for humans, were always in short supply and whale meat containing both in abundance--a valuable source of nutrition for the Japanese.

Food culture was passed down through the Nara period (710 - 794) and Heian period (794 - 1185) to until modern times. From the end of the Muromachi period in the 16th century to the Edo period, large-scale whaling corporations were organized in areas such as Kishu (roughly present-day Wakayama Prefecture) and Boshu (in present-day Chiba Prefecture) and spread nationwide.

During the Edo period, in particular, when methods of food preservation were developed and means of transportation dramatically advanced, preparation methods of whales dramatically increased. As said in the phrase, "One whale caught is seven shores enriched," one enormous whale was cut into large chunks of meat, which were corned or processed into *aramaki* (salted and wrapped in straw for preservation) and shipped in large junks all over the country via the Pacific Ocean and Sea of Japan.

In addition to corning, whale meat was also preserved in soy sauce and *miso* for shipping, which allowed the meat to be preserved for longer periods and seasoned with great flavors as well.

On top of that, the Japanese came up with ingenious methods not only in preparing the flesh for eating but other parts of the whale such as the skin, internal organs, tongue, jaws, tail fin, bones, baleen and teeth of whales. Japan has numerous ways of utilizing the entire whale compared to other countries. Apart from use of fat as lamp oil and a lubricant, bones and teeth were used as ornaments and carved toggles for swords, teeth as pipes and baleen, which was used as shoehorns and puppets, was also stretched inside drums for improving the sound. In this way, from old times, the Japanese have eaten and entirely used the whales they caught. The Japanese always treated whales with respect and spared no effort to show reverence. All in all, Japanese have been grateful for the blessings of whales and deeply love and respect them.

As to be described later, evidence of this is that there are memorial mounds and graves of whales in temples near whaling stations where whaling thrived. What is even more surprising is that many temples nationwide give a posthumous name to each of the whales caught and hold memorial services for them.

While a number of countries have used whales from old times, only Japan has memorial services, propitiating the spirits of whales in this manner. This shows how the Japanese as a people have loved whales and respected them from the bottom of their hearts.

Anyway, the Japanese have lived their lives integrated with whales through their long history and, in my mind, the blood of whales flows inside each Japanese.

Some ask, “Why do we need to go to the trouble of hunting and eating whales? Aren’t beef and pork enough?”

The issue is not that easily settled.

First of all, whale meat-eating is an element of Japanese folk culture that has existed since the Jomon period (14,000 - 1,000 BC). Once a certain element of a culture is lost, it is impossible to regain, which should be evident based on many examples from the past.

Secondly, it provides a measure for dealing with the potential food crisis that is certain to come. It is said that, in the near future, a food crisis on a global scale will undoubtedly erupt--this will be discussed later in detail. Japan currently depends on foreign countries for a significant amount of its food (60% of the food eaten by the Japanese). If a food crisis comes to Japan and food imports from overseas are stopped, what will become of the Japanese population of 120 million?

Besides, present-day Japan has seen its agriculture and fishery weakened and its productivity rapidly

decline. In consideration of this situation, who can definitely say that we will not starve in the future if we do nothing?

It is true that, at one time, Japan overhunted whales. In the “golden age,” various countries, including Japan, competed in catching the largest number of whales, which was even described as an “International Whaling Olympics.”

Serious reflection was needed and this is why the Japanese stopped commercial whaling and waited for whales to recover. Now, there are a large number of whales. In fact, there is likely an excessive increase such that an imbalance in the marine ecosystems could occur. When this taken into consideration, the preservation of whales alone also causes a problem.

As a consequence of the showy performances and campaigns by anti-whaling countries and certain environmental groups, some Japanese have recently come to have negative attitudes toward Japan’s whaling, which is supported by some newspapers.

When it comes to reasons why whale meat-eating should be prohibited, typical answers given are: “whales are endangered,” “whales have intelligence,” “it is cruel to whales” and “whales are a symbol of global environmental protection.” However, as I will explain in the body of this book, some species have undergone a population explosion, not all species of whales are endangered and it has not been proven whether whales are “intelligent.” If something is cruel to whales, then it must be cruel to other animals, too. Furthermore, raising cattle and swine is said to be polluting the global environment, more so than whale hunting. None of the logic of the anti-whaling faction holds. That is, what the anti-whaling nations and organizations are saying are nothing more than simple appeals to emotion.

The whale ecology is still mysterious. What is required, based on reflecting on random overhunting of the past, is to understand the realities and population of whales through research and make use of an appropriate and scientifically based number of them to maintain the balance of nature.

This book intends to advocate the appropriate utilization of whales from the perspective of concerns for food for the next generation, environmental issues and food culture without being carried away by simple-minded appeals to emotion.

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