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The safety of bycatch: South Korean responses to the moratorium on commercial whaling



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Abstract When the global moratorium on commercial whaling was implemented in 1986, Korea prohibited whaling; however, there was no effort to build the capacity of social institutions to guide local residents to cooperate with the policy. Utilizing a social ecology approach, this research examines the practice of eating whale meat in Ulsan, South Korea, to illustrate the importance of culture for attaining the social acceptance of wildlife conservation policy. The cultural models which influence the consumption of whale meat are here classified as representing four distinct responses to the moratorium: opposition, resistance, evasion and support. The two most important changes are the public utilization of whale meat as a symbol of an endangered culture, and the reliance on meat procured legally from accidental entanglements of whales in fishing nets (cetacean bycatch). These cultural changes have a social function, which is to impart legitimacy and acceptance to the continued consumption of whale meat, from illegal as well as legal sources. Given the cultural acceptance of whale meat, I argue that it will not be possible to eradicate the illegal market through enforcement alone. Instead, the solution is to persuade local consumers of whale meat to cooperate with the moratorium.

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Introduction

Since 1986, it has been illegal to hunt whales, porpoises or dolphins in South Korea. However, the Korean delegates at the 64th meeting of the International Whaling Commission [IWC] caused an international uproar when they announced Korea's plans to hunt North Pacific minke whales [*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*] for scientific purposes. After diplomatic

protests from other governments, South Korea backed away from the initial statement and cancelled the program of research whaling (Oh, 2012). Opponents of whaling saw it as a victory for whale conservation, and announced that the international moratorium on commercial whaling in effect since 1986 would continue protecting whales in Korea.

However, because of increasing demand for whale meat and high incidence of illegal whaling, the moratorium has failed to protect whales in Korea. In January of 2011, South Korea announced a tougher policy to combat whaling (BBC News, 2011). In spite of the tougher enforcement measures, in 2011 South Korea had the highest incidence of illegal

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whaling in the world, with 22 Korean citizens receiving prison sentences and fines for 21 cases of whaling discovered by police (Yonhap News, 2012). Furthermore, Korea has a high incidence of accidental whale deaths caused by entanglements in fishing nets. For the years 2004–2011, 89 minke whales on average die annually in net entanglements. Known as “incidental catch” or “bycatch,” these whales can be sold legally in Korea for human consumption. Both illegal whaling and incidental catch continue to feed Korea’s growing demand for whale meat.

Bycatch has been the cause of intense debate between the opponents of whaling and the proponents of whale meat. Environmentalist groups such as KFEM [Korean Federation of Environmental Movements] and Greenpeace have argued that in most cases, the accidental entanglements of whales in fishing nets are not in fact accidental (Black, 2005; Demick, 2005). They claim that Korea’s high rate of minke whale bycatch compared to other countries cannot be coincidental, and must surely indicate a disguised form of whaling. In contrast, Korean fishermen have argued that the unusually high rate of bycatch is an indicator that as a result of the moratorium, whales have reproduced to the point of extreme overabundance. For the fishers, frequent bycatch is a sign that whale and dolphin populations need to be thinned artificially through hunting (SBS News, 2012). In an attempt to correct this misperception, scientists of the Cetacean Research Institute [CRI] of Korea have clarified that there is no direct relationship between the size of the minke whale population and the incidence of bycatch (SBS News, 2012).

In this article, I maintain that the debate about Korea’s high level of bycatch is not merely a conflict of opinion, such as could be resolved by scientific evidence. Rather, it is a clash of opposed cultural interpretations, in the sense of “models of and for reality” (Geertz, 1977). Anthropologists have utilized the concept of “cultural model” to refer to knowledge about the environment, knowledge which is structured by social organization and which has visible influence on discourses and behaviors at the community level (Blount and Kitner 2007; Paolisso and Dery, 2010). Culturally motivated behaviors can pose major problems for conservation of biological species and natural resources. This is the case of the moratorium on commercial whaling in Korea, where reactions to the moratorium have undermined the efforts to protect whales from human predation. Based on this case study, I advance the argument that a successful policy to protect whales from human predation must take full account of the local culture.

Why do Koreans continue to eat whale meat, even though whaling is illegal in Korea? The motivations are cultural. Whale meat is a delicacy in the southeastern coastal cities of Korea, especially in Ulsan, Busan, Gyeongju and Pohang. Unique among these cities, Ulsan is the center of a political movement to legalize and reinstate whale hunting in defiance of the worldwide moratorium. The municipal government of Ulsan Namgu [South District] has attempted to promote the use of whale meat to attract tourists and business development. Ulsan is also the city with the highest concentration of whale meat specialty restaurants. As a recognized center of culinary activism and political support for whaling, Ulsan was chosen for this research as the source of discourses about the cultural value of whale meat Fig. 1.

Bycatch in Korea must be studied as a socio-cultural and socio-economic problem which stands in the way of whale

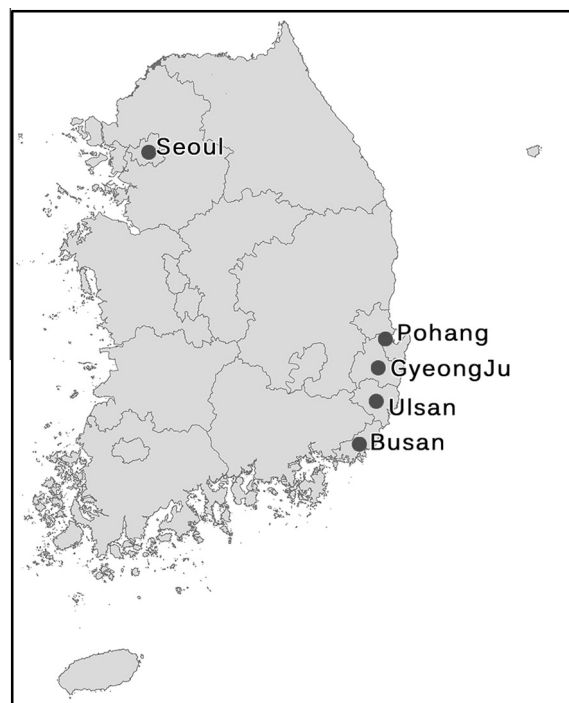


Fig. 1 Map of Korean cities where whale meat is eaten. Courtesy of D.K. Yoon, UNIST School of Urban and Environmental Engineering, using ArcGIS.

conservation management in Korea. What is important for conservation policy is not whose conception of bycatch is “correct,” but the social context in which these cultural models acquire descriptive power. In South Korea, this context is characterized by three important social phenomena: mobilized stakeholders taking action to defend the use of whale meat in a culinary subculture; the intervention of local government to promote whale meat as a symbol of cultural heritage; and the existence of a consumer-driven market for whale meat. The research method undertaken here is to uncover the social functions of the cultural models utilized by actors in this social context.

Materials and methods

The research was carried out through interviews and direct observation. Interviews were carried out with public officials of the Bureau of Whale Tourism of Ulsan Namgu Kang Jun-hee and Suh Jae-in, who provided valuable assistance. In addition, the author is grateful to Lee Man-woo and Go Jeong-goo of the Whale Culture Preservation Association [WCPA] for generously allowing numerous interviews and patiently explaining their views about the future of whales and “whale culture” in Ulsan. I am also grateful to Park Seon-goo, Director of the Ulsan Whale Museum, and I am especially grateful to An Du Hae, Director of the Cetacean Research Institute [CRI] of the National Fisheries Research and Development Institute.

Direct observation was carried out by the author at staged public events in the city of Ulsan. I attended the Ulsan Whale Festival four times (2010–2013) and observed how whale meat

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