



Getting to know the consumer: Toward mitigation of illegal whale meat consumption in South Korea

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ABSTRACT

In the Republic of Korea, anthropogenic mortalities of whales are connected to a high demand for whale meat, which stimulates illegal whaling. Demand in Korea is subnational and localized to the southeast coast, especially the city of Ulsan where policies have encouraged the growth in the number of whale meat specialty restaurants. Korean policy permits the sale of cetacean bycatch for human consumption, but requires investigation of all cetacean mortalities and certification of legitimate bycatch. Based on the idea that consumer demand is the driver of illegal whaling, the beliefs that inform consumer behavior were identified by administering a survey questionnaire to patrons of the Ulsan Whale Festival in 2013. Respondents can be grouped into three types, frequent consumers, occasional consumers and non-consumers of whale meat. The survey establishes the connection between frequent consumers and a pro-whaling political stance, but the occasional consumers were affiliated with both the pro-whaling and the anti-whaling norms. The influence of conflicting norms on the consumer indicates a position that takes advantage of the ambiguity caused by the anti-whaling policy at the national level in Korea, and the pro-whaling policy of Ulsan's municipal government. This ambiguity can be resolved under the current Korean policy which requires certification of bycatch, if a verification and monitoring system is instituted to prevent retail outlets from selling products sourced in illegal whaling.

1. Introduction

One of the most rancorous environmental debates is the debate over whaling. In 1982, based on the perception that some whale species were in peril of extinction because of commercial whaling, the International Whaling Commission [IWC] voted to halt whaling among all member nations, a decision now known as the moratorium on commercial whaling. After the moratorium went into effect in 1986, it has been vigorously opposed by some IWC member nations that use whale meat as a source of food. The government of Japan continues to argue from a scientific standpoint that certain whale stocks are not endangered by whaling, and furthermore, that during the 31 years of the moratorium some stocks have reproduced to the point of overabundance [1]. In defense of the moratorium, conservation minded scientists have argued that many whale stocks are still at risk, and that the Japanese government's justifications for whaling are lacking in scientific basis [2].

The Republic of Korea and Japan share a sea that divides their territories, and both nations exploit the marine resources of this sea. As both are IWC member nations, Korea and Japan share responsibility for

conservation of the migratory whale stocks which traverse these waters. However, the two countries have adopted very different policies in relation to the moratorium. Japan actively works to overturn the moratorium and carries out pelagic whaling in international waters under scientific permit, producing a surplus of whale meat for domestic markets. In contrast, the Republic of Korea has not opposed the moratorium, but has supplied its domestic market for whale meat with cetacean bycatch—the whales and dolphins entangled incidentally in fishing gear.

Although Korea and Japan adapted to the moratorium on commercial whaling in a contrasting manner, in both cases their policies on whaling are intended to maintain outward compliance with the moratorium, while supplying whale meat for *cultural needs*. This term refers to the claim by members of the population who believe that eating whale meat is a tradition necessary for the continuation of a culture. The USA, Russia, and Canada have indigenous tribes that demand the right to continue traditional patterns of subsistence, which include whaling [3]. Japanese and Korean advocates of whaling have similarly argued for a need to continue the tradition of consuming whale meat, but this argument has been criticized because Japan and Korea are

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industrialized and do not require whaling for subsistence [4]. However, the claim of a cultural need for whaling by Japan and Korea must be taken seriously, since cultural needs can contribute to market demand.

In some cases, conservation scientists oppose whaling and argue that the cultural need for whale meat consumption does not exist, and that the market for whale meat is not the driver of whaling. For example, Clapham et al. [2, p. 316] argued, “Left to purely market forces, this [whaling] industry would likely die since Japan’s populace has lost its taste for whale meat.” Greenpeace [5] and the International Fund for Animal Welfare [6] similarly point to opinion polls in the news media as evidence that the Japanese majority do not consume whale meat, arguing that demand for whale meat is not a driver of Japanese whaling. In the Korean case, however, consumer demand is clearly a factor that drives illegal whaling.

In 2011, the Korean government announced a “crackdown” on illegal whaling [7], but in 2012 South Korea was revealed to have the highest rate of illegal whaling worldwide [8]. A study of Korean fishing communities [9] found that fishers view the moratorium on commercial whaling as unjust, and as a threat to their livelihood. Hence, the suppliers of whale meat adhere to a pro-whaling viewpoint. However, it is currently unknown whether the consumer of whale meat also adheres to a pro-whaling political stance.

The aim of this article is to establish empirically whether the Korean consumer’s behavior is influenced by the pro-whaling norm or the anti-whaling norm. Following upon social scientific studies [10–14] indicating that the beliefs of stakeholders are critical to the success of conservation policies, it is necessary to measure the beliefs of whale meat consumers in Ulsan. The current Korean whaling policy represents a compromise position, an attempt to comply with the moratorium while supplying whale meat for cultural needs [15]. In this sense, the policy engages with contradictory social values. To learn why the policy has not succeeded, it is important to discover the norms which influence the consumer’s behavior.

In addition to illegal whaling, bycatch is a major anthropogenic threat to both baleen whales [16] and to small cetaceans [17]. Lukoschek et al. [18] vigorously argue that both Korea and Japan must act quickly to decrease the bycatch incidence of North Pacific minke whale stocks. However, to do so would require designating and enforcing areas closed to fishing, according to Korea’s Cetacean Research Center of the National Fisheries Research and Development Institute [19]. The economic repercussions of closed areas and the pro-whaling stance of the National Federation of Fisheries Cooperatives of Korea [20] would make it politically unfeasible to carry out the area closures. To find an exit from the current political impasse, improvements can be made to the existing Korean whaling policy to reduce anthropogenic pressure on cetacean stocks by reducing consumer demand for whale meat.

The following investigation of Korean whale meat consumption draws on the work of Fishbein and Ajzen [21] who maintain that decisions to perform a behavior—such as eating whale meat—are informed by beliefs about the behavior itself, rather than by general attitudes such as nationalism, or political allegiance. They identify three types of beliefs that lead to the formation of behavioral intentions: behavioral beliefs (attitudes), injunctive beliefs (norms) and control beliefs (about personal or environmental factors impinging on decision making). A survey instrument was administered to Korean whale meat consumers to identify their beliefs in relation to whale meat, specifically their beliefs about the moratorium and the Korean directive issued in 2011. Based upon the consumers’ beliefs about whale meat consumption identified by this survey, a set of recommendations for mitigation of illegal whaling in Korea is provided.

2. Origin of Korean policy on cetacean bycatch

When the global moratorium on commercial whaling came into force in 1986, the Republic of Korea issued an administrative directive prohibiting the capture of any cetacean—whale, dolphin or porpoise

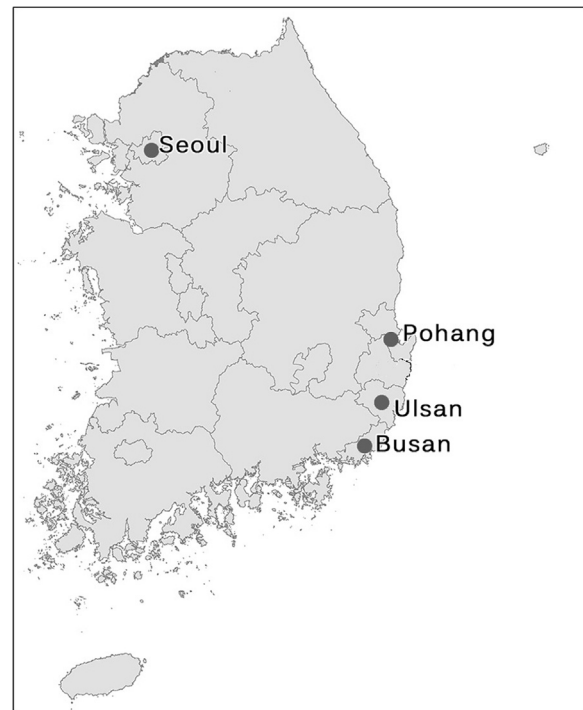


Fig. 1. Map showing local concentration of demand for whale meat in urban centers of the southeastern coastal region of the Republic of Korea.

[16]. However, the moratorium was felt as a devastating blow in the village of Jangsaengpo, a wharf community founded in 1899 when the first whaling outpost was established in Korea [22]. The community members, especially restaurant owners, resolved to maintain the custom of eating whale meat. In 1995, they established the annual celebration of the Ulsan Whale Festival, with the goal of keeping the tradition alive. The restaurants and the festival claim to utilize only meat from cetacean bycatch [23,24].

Whale meat consumers are a small minority in Korea, but highly concentrated in a specific region. Demand is localized to the southeastern triad of coastal cities, Pohang, Ulsan and Busan. In 2010, the city of Ulsan claimed to have over 100 restaurants specializing in whale meat [25]. In Ulsan, demand is seasonally concentrated with a spike during the Ulsan Whale Festival. In fact, Korean law enforcement agents report that the number of arrests for illegal whaling increases noticeably in the weeks leading up to the festival [19] (Fig. 1).

On January 3, 2011, the South Korean government announced intensified enforcement against illegal whaling [7] when the Ministry of Food, Agriculture, Forests and Fisheries [MIFAFF] issued the Directive on the Conservation and Management of Cetacean Resources. During the year of 2011 the number of arrests made for illegal whaling doubled over the previous year [26]. Nevertheless, newspapers reported that the crackdown was making whale meat scarce and prices were skyrocketing in response to demand [27,28]. The rising prices for whale meat indicated that the policy was stimulating illegal whaling rather than suppressing it.

Provisions of the Directive on the Conservation and Management of Cetacean Resources include the following [29,30]: (1) reporting of cetacean bycatch and collection of a DNA sample to be kept in a master database; (2) mandatory police investigation to confirm the take as incidental; (3) issuance of a Certificate of Cetacean Resources to certify legality; (4) the requirement that sale and processing of the whale can only occur at a facility certified by the government. The appropriateness of the 2011 directive for the Korean situation depends on one’s view of the whale meat market. There are two predominant views. The Korean management agencies maintain that the requirements of the directive to investigate and report bycatch are sufficient to segregate

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