

Whaling media blitz in defiance of IWC

Japan, the world's largest consumer of whale meat, said last week it plans to defy fierce international pressure and launch a nationwide campaign to win public support to continue whaling.

The International Whaling Commission will hold an annual conference in the ancient capital Kyoto in May. During the conference, Tokyo is expected to come under strong pressure to give up its traditional practice completely.

The government plans to advertise on television, as well as in newspapers and magazines, to send people the message that whale meat is a valuable source of nutrition with medicinal properties, a Fisheries Agency official said.

"It is important to tell people in Japan and abroad the scientific truth. Public understanding should come first," the official said.

The agency plans to distribute hundreds of thousands of leaflets and newsletters to local governments and schools.

Whale meat contains nutrients such as protein, vitamins and iron, and is effective in helping cure dermatitis, anemia, asthma and many other diseases, the official said.

According to IWC, 760,000 minke whales roam the Antarctic Ocean and 830,000 inhabit the North Atlantic.

The agency official said the

data show that up to 200,000 minke whales could be harvested over the next 100 years in the Antarctic, and that killing about 2,000 of them a year would not damage the marine environment.

Japan caught 288 whales last year in the Antarctic in the name of scientific research. Most of the catch ended up on Japanese dinner plates.

"Whale meat is the cleanest in the sense that it contains no pollutants because the sea mammals live in the Antarctic," the agency official said.

Japan consumed about 2,500 tons of whale meat in 1991. Some of the demand was met with stocks caught before a moratorium on commercial whaling was declared in 1987.

IWC's annual conference in Glasgow, Scotland, last July discussed ending the six-year ban on commercial whaling but ended in a standoff between environmentalists and whaling interests in the 37-member group.

"We know we should not resort to the mass killing of whales. But whaling should be permitted within the scientifically verified limit," the official said.

In 1965, Japan caught a record 22,000 whales in coastal and Antarctic waters. The number fell to 2,700 per year by 1987, in part due to quotas imposed by IWC and partly

because of the availability of cheaper sources of protein.

Japan was allowed a three-year grace period when IWC imposed a commercial ban in 1985, and has since been permitted to carry out "scientific" whaling.

After World War II, the government rationed whale meat to prevent malnutrition among starving people. But in recent years, the plunge in supply accompanied by the rise in prices for whale meat has transformed it into a gourmet food.

On the drive to boost public opinion in a bid to sway the international conference in May, Takehiro Takayama, a director of the Whaling Association, said Monday a publicity caravan organized by 25 fisheries groups will set off this week from Kyushu and wind its way to Tokyo.

The controversial message: hunting whales and eating their meat is part of Japanese tradition.

"What we're saying is, if you've got ethical problems with eating whales it's fine to prohibit it in your country, but don't start bringing it up at international conferences," Takayama said.

That is precisely the strategy of antiwhaling groups, which have the support of many nations in the IWC. Since 1982, the commission has banned almost all com-

mercial whaling.

Japan is also being criticized for killing animals that are too intelligent to be humanely hunted.

Whale was once a staple food in Japan, and Takayama said part of the fisheries' campaign is to attract patrons at the handful of restaurants around the country that still serve the meat.

On the ninth day of every month whale lunches run half-price at the restaurants. The drive attracted 250 people last month at one Tokyo whale establishment, Takayama said.

The overall goal, he said, is to show public support for whaling to the government and other IWC members.

Antiwhaling groups are lined up behind a French proposal to be presented at the IWC gathering in Kyoto that would ban all whaling south of 40 degrees latitude south. That would end scientific whaling.

Fisheries Agency officials said the government has not yet arranged to conduct a publicity campaign of its own. But they said the agency is working with private groups to win support for Japan's proposal that the IWC allow controlled commercial hunts of minke whales to resume.

Tokyo feels that if 760,000 of the whales live in Antarctic waters, controlled hunts will not threaten the species.