

Japan may be target at whaling talks

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Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry's surprise 1853 port call aboard the "black ships" to secure refueling bases for American whalers in the Western Pacific sent shock waves across a then reclusive Japan under the Tokugawa shogunate.

Ironically, Japan is expected to be a principal target of foreign criticism for its ongoing prowhaling stance at a general assembly meeting in May of the International Whaling Commission in Kyoto, 140 years after Perry's arrival.

This will be the first time in 25 years that Japan hosts the annual gathering.

"Japan will press at the IWC meeting for a lifting of a moratorium on commercial hunting of minke whales in the Antarctic, because stocks of the species have recovered enough there," a senior Foreign Ministry official said.

An estimated 760,000 minke whales are said to exist in the Antarctic. Japan's prowhaling policy is based on data compiled by the IWC's scientific committee last year that show that between 170,000 and 200,000 minke whales may be harvested over the next 100 years without the species be-

coming threatened with extinction.

Since the IWC imposed a moratorium on commercial whaling at a general assembly meeting in 1982, Japan's activities have been limited to reportedly hunting 300 minke whales annually for scientific research purposes.

Among whaling nations, Iceland withdrew from the IWC last year to protest the continued ban on commercial whaling, and Norway has threatened to resume hunting this year regardless of the outcome of the Kyoto conference.

It remains uncertain whether Norway will carry out its threat, in part because such a move will probably make it more difficult for the nation to become a member of the European Community and in part because of possible economic sanctions from the United States.

While Japan and a few other whaling nations have called for commercial whaling to be resumed, based on the IWC's data, under a "revised management scheme or procedure," antiwhaling nations that form a majority of IWC members remain adamantly opposed.

Antiwhaling nations insist that additional steps, includ-

ing strict monitoring of compliance with catch quotas, be introduced before commercial hunting can be permitted.

For Japan, the economic impact of a continued ban on commercial whaling is quite limited because of the relatively small number of people who depend on whales as a source of revenue.

But the government contends that Japan cannot drop its demand for resumption of commercial whaling because it is "an issue concerning principles and not solely an economic one."

It appears unlikely the conference will approve resumption of commercial whaling because such a decision requires a three-fourths majority of votes at the general assembly meeting.

The Foreign Ministry official, speaking on condition of anonymity, acknowledged it will be difficult to get the moratorium lifted at the Kyoto gathering.

As prospects for lifting the ban appear dim, a proposal to create a "sanctuary" for whales in the Antarctic initiated by France last year is likely to instead be the biggest issue at the conference, a government source predicted.

It is still uncertain if the sanctuary proposal will be ap-

proved in Kyoto, the source said.

The government announced last week it will propose to other IWC nations at the conference to consider measures for increasing blue whale stocks.

The blue whale is the largest of the species and the one in most danger of extinction. It is estimated that only 700 blue whales remain in the Antarctic Ocean.

"Just waiting for a natural recovery of blue whales is not enough. The IWC nations should consider specific measures to actively boost their numbers," a government official said.

The Japanese proposal on the blue whale apparently is designed to allay growing foreign criticism of Tokyo's lobbying for resumption of commercial whaling.

"Japan is serious about preserving whale resources. But commercial whaling should be permitted if scientific data warrant it," a government source said.

"Antiwhaling nations are opposing the resumption of commercial whaling not because they want to preserve whale resources, but because they believe catching whales is morally bad," the source said.