

IN A DESPERATE LAST-DITCH ATTEMPT to revive flagging demand for whale meat, Japan's only offshore whaling company has started selling it from vending machines.

Kyodo Senpaku Co. is selling whale bacon, tinned whale, whale steaks and raw whale sashimi from white vending machines, decorated with cartoon whales, at two locations in Tokyo and one in nearby Yokohama. Prices range from 1,000 (£6) to 3,000 yen (£19). Their plan is to install machines at more than 100 locations over the next five years.

The company claims that early sales from the unmanned *kujira* (whale) stores have been 'encouraging' – attracting older people wanting a trip down memory lane as well as inquisitive youngsters. It does help that there is little competition, of course (major supermarket chains tend to shy away from whale meat to avoid protests by anti-whaling groups).

Kyodo Senpaku already provides about 100 tonnes of whale meat every year for school lunches, in the hope of raising a new generation of whale meat-eaters. The vending machines are merely the latest ruse to battle changing tastes and a growing awareness of the cruelty of whaling. I believe it is impossible to kill a whale humanely at sea.

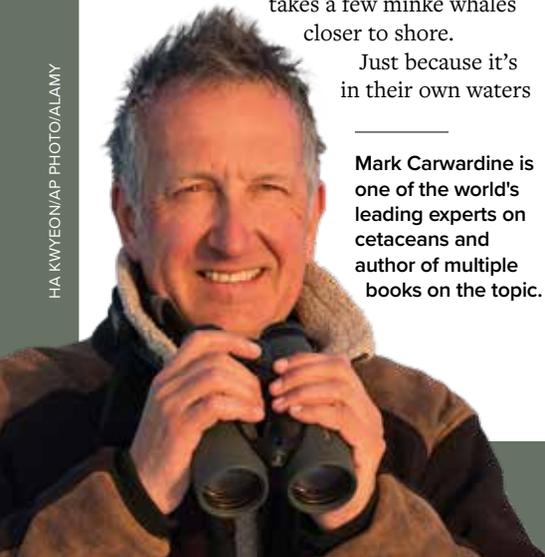
Whale meat was popular in Japan during a time of food shortages after the Second World War. (We ate whale meat in Britain then, too.) Until 1962, when sales peaked at 233,000 tonnes, it accounted for up to 30 per cent of all meat eaten in Japan. But as chicken, pork and beef became more affordable, consumption of whale meat plummeted.

Nowadays, it accounts for less than 0.1 per cent of total meat consumption. Japan eats just 1,000 tonnes of whale meat annually; Kyodo Senpaku claims that, for the industry to survive, consumption needs to be nearer 5,000 tonnes.

The country's self-allocated quota for 2023 is 379 whales (minke, Bryde's and sei) within the country's 200-mile Exclusive Economic Zone. Most are taken by Kyodo Senpaku, but a fleet of five small boats also takes a few minke whales closer to shore.

Just because it's in their own waters

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HA KWYEON/AP PHOTO/ALAMY



Whale meat is sold from a vending machine in Yokohama

“It’s just a small but influential group who drive Japan’s whaling interests”

MARK CARWARDINE

OPINION

doesn't give them a 'right' to kill whales. Whales roam the oceans, ignoring political boundaries, and therefore belong to everyone and (most significantly) no one. But Japan is now a rogue state. It stormed out of the International Whaling Commission (IWC) in 2019 and resumed commercial whaling in its own waters the same year. It is no longer bound by the global moratorium on whaling or any other international whaling regulations.

The good news is that the government subsidies that have kept Japanese whaling afloat for so many years are gradually being phased out. The annual subsidy was 5.1 billion yen (£32 million), but it dropped to 1.3 billion yen (£8.1 million) after Japan left the IWC. Now the government merely provides a loan of 340 million yen (£2.1 million), which must be repaid.

But Kyodo Senpaku isn't going to give

up that easily. Currently, it operates four ships – three hunting vessels and the world's only whaling factory ship (to process the carcasses). In a show of determination, it is constructing a new 6 billion yen (£37.5 million) factory ship to replace the ageing *Nisshin Maru* next year.

“The vending machines are merely the latest ruse to battle changing tastes”

So why does Japan persist in killing whales – in blatant defiance of world opinion (not to mention the 1986 global ban on commercial whaling)? It doesn't make sense when the industry employs only 170 people. And few would argue that whaling

is an important part of the country's culture.

In reality, it's just a small but influential group of politicians and whaling industry stakeholders who drive the country's whaling interests. But it's more than that. No-one really cares about whales, or whaling. Quite simply, Japan won't back down under international pressure – it's all about saving face. 🐋