

Preserving Whales: A Call For Collaboration Between The U.s. And Japan

written by Ikeda Tomoyo | October 6, 2024



Before the mid-19th century, Japan was an isolated nation, closed off to almost all contact with foreign countries. This period of isolation, known as *Sakoku*, lasted from the early 1600s to the 1850s. During this time, Japan strictly controlled the entry and residence of foreigners, with only a few Dutch traders allowed to live on the tiny, artificial island of Dejima in Nagasaki Bay. The Dutch were the only Westerners permitted to engage in limited trade with Japan, while most of the outside world had little access to the country.

However, Japan's isolation came to an abrupt end in the 1850s when the United States intervened. In 1853, Commodore Matthew Perry, leading a squadron of U.S. Navy warships, sailed into Edo Bay (modern-day Tokyo Bay) to demand that Japan open its ports to foreign trade. This military display, often referred to as "gunboat diplomacy," was intended to force Japan to establish diplomatic and commercial relations with the West, particularly the United States. The primary reason for this aggressive diplomatic move was to support the American whaling industry, which was booming at the time.

During the mid-19th century, the whaling industry was one of the largest and most influential industries in the United States. Whale oil was in high demand, serving as a crucial source of fuel for lamps, lubricants for machinery, and a base material for soaps and other products. Whalers from the U.S. were hunting whales across the globe, and the waters around Japan were known to have a high concentration of whales. This made the region highly attractive to the American whaling fleet.

However, there was a significant logistical challenge. The seas around Japan were far from U.S. shores, and whaling ships needed places to restock fuel, food, and other supplies during their long voyages. Japan, with its prime geographic location in the Pacific, was seen as an ideal stopover point for these ships. The problem was that Japan's policy of isolation made it impossible for American ships to anchor in Japanese harbors and resupply. Recognizing this obstacle, the U.S. Senate decided to take action. In order to secure access to Japanese ports, the U.S. government resolved to send warships to Japan to initiate diplomatic relations and open the country to trade.

The arrival of Commodore Perry and his warships marked a turning point in Japanese history. The sight of the U.S. Navy's powerful steam-powered ships was a stark contrast to Japan's comparatively outdated military technology, and it made clear that Japan could not easily resist the demands of the West. After tense negotiations, Japan reluctantly signed the Treaty of Kanagawa in 1854, which opened two Japanese ports to American ships and established formal diplomatic relations between the two countries. This treaty effectively ended Japan's isolationist policies and ushered in a new era of international engagement.

Fast-forward to the present day, the issue of whaling remains a contentious topic, especially between Japan and the international community. In recent years, Japan has been accused of violating international law by continuing to hunt whales under the guise of "scientific research." Many conservation groups, as well as several nations, including the United States, have criticized Japan for what they view as a thinly veiled attempt to continue commercial whaling despite a global moratorium on the practice.

On September 19, 2014, the BBC reported that Japan was once again under fire for conducting whaling operations in defiance of international regulations. Japan had claimed that its whaling activities were conducted for scientific purposes, but many environmental groups argued that the country's whaling was essentially commercial in nature, with the meat from the killed whales often ending up in markets and restaurants. The United States, among other nations, has been a leading voice in calling for Japan to cease its whaling practices and respect international agreements aimed at protecting whale populations.

However, this situation raises a significant question: should the United States reflect on its own history before criticizing Japan? The U.S. played a pivotal role in decimating whale populations during the 19th century when its whaling industry was at its peak. The demand for whale oil and other products led American whalers to hunt whales nearly to the brink of extinction in many parts of the world, including the waters surrounding Japan. In fact, it was the U.S. pursuit of whaling that initially brought the country into direct contact with Japan, leading to the end of Japan's isolationist policies.

Given this historical context, it seems somewhat hypocritical for the United States to condemn Japan for its whaling practices without acknowledging its own role in the near extinction of several whale species. While today's international laws prevent the U.S. from

sending warships to Japan as it did in the 1850s, it is important to recognize that the U.S. has contributed to the very problem it now seeks to address. The American whaling industry of the past hunted whales relentlessly, contributing to the depletion of whale populations that conservationists and governments are now working to restore.

If the United States is genuinely committed to saving whales and protecting marine biodiversity, a more collaborative approach might be more effective. Rather than simply accusing Japan of violating international law, the U.S. could offer to work alongside Japan's researchers to develop sustainable conservation strategies. The focus should be on mutual cooperation, learning from past mistakes, and ensuring that both countries work together to protect whale populations for future generations. This could involve joint scientific research, data sharing, and collaboration on efforts to monitor and protect whale species in the Pacific Ocean.

In conclusion, while Japan's whaling activities in the name of research deserve scrutiny, the United States must also take responsibility for its historical role in the global decline of whale populations. Criticism without reflection on one's own history can come across as hypocritical. Instead of finger-pointing, the U.S. should seek a collaborative approach to marine conservation, acknowledging its past while working toward a more sustainable future. Whaling is a complex issue, deeply rooted in history, culture, and economics. Only through mutual understanding and cooperation can real progress be made in protecting these magnificent creatures from extinction.