

## **Don't sacrifice relations with Japan over whaling**

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Along with the Boxing Day test, the Sydney to Hobart race and the Australian Open, it has become a fixture in Australia's summer calendar. I'm talking, of course, about the cat-and-mouse ritual played out by Japanese whalers and anti-whaling zealots in the stormy Southern Ocean.

At one level, it's all harmless sport (unless you're a whale, of course). The media love it, naturally. What could be better to fill the long January news drought until Australians shake off the sand and reluctantly gird themselves for another year? After all, it's a story that has everything: drama on the high seas, diplomatic strains, cute animals, passion, conflict and even blood.

The reality is that it isn't just theatre or a catchy media filler. Not to put too fine a point on it, the whole thing has become bloody dangerous — not to mention pointless and counterproductive. It's time all concerned took a step back. There is simply far too much at stake to allow this reckless Christmas pantomime to continue.

For starters, there is the growing likelihood someone will get killed — whether activist, whaler or some poor unfortunate soul, most likely Australian, sent into some of the world's most forbidding waters to rescue them. There have been collisions in the past, but this year brought an actual sinking (all captured by the cameras, naturally). Sure, no one died, but it's only a matter of time. No conservation cause is worth risking human lives at sea.

Every year the anti-whaling activists push the confrontation closer to the edge. Privately, officials are in no doubt that it is Sea Shepherd, not the Japanese, that initiates these incidents and bears most of the responsibility. Perhaps that's the only way to keep a cynical media interested and hungry for more, and the dollars rolling in from a credulous public. The activists might frustrate the whalers and lower the annual whaling catch a bit, and no doubt they bask both in the media attention and the warm inner glow of self-righteousness. But they can't stop the Japanese from whaling, and ultimately their nautical antics do the cause more harm than good.

The unglamorous reality is that the only hope of achieving an end to whaling is through patient diplomacy and the methodical workings of the International Whaling Commission (IWC). All Sea Shepherd's tactics are achieving is to anger the Japanese and make them dig in more firmly. If they were really serious they would be taking off their life jackets, donning a suit and joining the diplomats around the table for the next IWC annual meeting in Morocco in May. If this issue is ever to be resolved, that's where it will happen.

But the blame doesn't stop with the activists and a sensationalist media. Whaling is cruel and completely unnecessary. The days when it was an indispensable supplement to wartime diets are long gone. I've never tasted whale meat, but nor have I ever met anyone who has and likes it. Even Prime Minister Hatoyama has acknowledged he refuses to eat it. Japan's pursuit of 'scientific' whaling in the face of international condemnation — including by Australia and some of Tokyo's other closest diplomatic partners — is anachronistic, perverse and inconsistent with Japan's broader interests. It speaks more to Japan's insecurity, anxiety and crying need for real political reform than anything else.

Unfortunately, Japan's first change of government in more than half a century doesn't seem to have helped. The new DPJ government promised much, but to judge from sagging poll numbers it is already failing to meet expectations and shaping up to be yet another blow to the hopes of the Japanese people for political and economic change. Prime Minister Hatoyama and his inexperienced team have made a hash of Japan's most important international relationship: its alliance with the US. They show no sign of coming to grips with

Japan's chronic economic malaise (Hatoyama has already lost a finance minister — a fiscal conservative — and replaced him with someone who, despite two decades of evidence to the contrary, thinks Tokyo can spend its way out of recession). The government has had little attention to spare for Australia and has exacerbated the whaling dispute with needlessly blunt and increasingly ad hominem criticism of Australian ministers.

Nor has the Rudd government covered itself in glory. Rudd's fixation with China and early neglect of Japan was the main reason the relationship took a turn for the worse after he came to office, but his domestic political posturing on whaling also played a part. As opposition foreign affairs spokesman from 2001 to 2006, Rudd — ever alert to an easy opportunity to bolster his support on the Labor left — latched onto the anti-whaling cause. The ALP's campaign commitment to take Japan to court was sensationalist, ill-considered and problematic both in legal and policy terms, as Rudd and his gung-ho sidekick Peter Garrett discovered to their chagrin when officials briefed them after the election. (By contrast, foreign minister Stephen Smith has reportedly been a quiet voice of sanity.) Canberra's public statements have been so careful to avoid criticising Sea Shepherd that the Rudd government looks to have little regard for law, safety at sea or reality.

The opposition has done what oppositions do, and looked to make political hay. Tony Abbott's intervention, however, has been refreshing. In his usual forthright style, the opposition leader made an obvious, albeit largely lost, point: the Australia-Japan relationship is too important to both countries to be put in jeopardy by the pointless annual spat over whaling.

Abbott is right. Both governments understandably downplay any link between whaling and trade, but that doesn't mean siding with the anti-whaling crowd is cost-free for Australia. After all, Japan is Australia's second-largest export market and a major source of much-needed foreign investment. And Tokyo has been Australia's closest, most reliable and most influential regional partner. Few of Australia's diplomatic achievements in Asia — such as the establishment of APEC and our participation in the East Asia Summit — would have happened without Japan's active support.

Japan needs Australia, too. With a struggling economy, neighbouring North Korea developing nuclear weapons and missiles and long-term rival China feeling its oats, Japan has few other genuine friends in the region.

Seen in this light, both sides have much to ponder. They can't afford to let a handful of unrepresentative vigilantes hijack a vitally important partnership. The Rudd government should lead by taking active steps to de-escalate the situation — including withdrawing its impotent threat of legal action, abandoning its anti-Japanese rhetoric and levelling with the Australian public about Sea Shepherd's unacceptable activities. New Zealand's foreign minister Murray McCully got it right when he said: 'The New Zealand government is totally opposed to Japanese whaling taking place in the Southern Ocean, but we're also opposed to killing human beings down there as well.'

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