

*IWC commentary 5.07*

A woman I met at the annual spring “Welcoming the Whales” festival on Whidbey Island just emailed me from Alaska with a haunting question. She is attending the International Whaling Commission during which countries decide the yearly quotas of whales and dolphins to be killed.

“Do you think there is any connection between the humpback whales stranded these past days in the Sacramento River and Japan’s plans to kill 50 humpbacks in the southern hemisphere?”

This woman is posting Buddhist prayer flags at the IWC to call attention to the intense behind-the-scenes lobbying by leading whaling nations of Japan, Iceland, and Greenland to expand hunting of humpback and minke whales. Paul Spong, who founded Greenpeace and with his research partner Helena Symonds, runs the world-renown OrcaLab on Vancouver Island, is writing daily reports from the IWC. Pleading with Japan not to hunt humpbacks, New Zealand declared that “humpbacks are icons,” Spong writes, “their images and songs are what identify whales to people.” Then three young girls from New South Wales presented 40,000 signatures in an appeal to Japan to “spare their friends.”

Friendship. This is the word that defines what is missing in the interspecies equation between rescuers trying to guide humpbacks to sea and a conference to decide on the new quotas for killing whales. Surely we are a schizophrenic species, especially when it comes to whales. On one hand, we reach out to them; and with the same hands, we harpoon them.

Japan, who leads the world in whale hunting, is perhaps the most conflicted of all. Paul Spong reports that this country has killed “more than 5,000 whales” in its relentless crusade against cetaceans. Every year they slaughter whales under their so-called “scientific whaling,” much of which ends up in high-end Japanese meat markets. But what most people don’t know is that Japan also has a very successful whale-watching business that actually is more lucrative than its government-subsidized whale hunts.

According to Doug Thompson’s *Whales: Touching the Mystery*, in the spring of 2005, “Japan made \$26.5 million by hunting about a thousand whales in the Antarctic, including Fin Whales. . . . At the same time, Japanese conservationists claim that well over one hundred thousand whale watches in Japan spent more than \$30 million in that same year.” Why, asks Thompson, does a government that makes more money on whale-watching than hunting whales defiantly ignore international outrage and real scientific data that whale populations are at risk -- especially now as global warming affects whale migrations, food supply, and habitat?

Reading the daily IWC reports at OrcaNetwork.org and trying to fathom all these questions, I glance at a photo on my desk. It is of two Japanese women, Yoshiko and Masumi, a mother-daughter pair who journeyed with what we fondly call our “pod” of researchers and naturalists to Baja birthing grounds for gray whales. “Friendlies,” the researchers call these mother-calf pairs who seek physical contact with whale-watchers in Mexico’s biosphere of San Ignacio Lagoon.

Leaning far out from our small skiff, Yoshiko and Masumi cried out in happiness as their hands made first contact with a gray whale calf. All tiny whiskers, curious, unblinking eye, and sleek, melon-like skin, the calf played with us in a bewilderingly complex trust between species.

In gratitude, Yoshiko and her daughter sang a Japanese song to this gentle calf. “It’s a lullaby called *Sakura*,” they said. “We sing this at our spring cherry blossom festival.”

“*Sakuraaaa . . . Yayoi no sora wa . . .*” we sang out together as Yoshiko taught us the lullaby. It means “Cherry blossoms/ as far as I can see.”

Singing as the calf rose to our outstretched hands, her mother drifting protectively nearby, I realized that the tiny white barnacles etched in the calf’s supple skin looked just like cherry blossoms. Later that spring, a lone gray whale shocked everyone by swimming into Tokyo Harbor in the middle of their Sakura cherry blossom festival. There are only about 100 gray whales left in Japan’s once mighty gray whale population. And only 12 sightings of the mammal have been confirmed around Japan’s islands since the 1960s. This solitary whale was greeted with happiness and good will by holidaymakers lining the harbor. Several days later, the whale died.

I ponder these paradoxes and connections as I follow the daily IWC whale politics – where countries play poker with endangered species. As the mother-calf humpbacks swim for their lives toward the open ocean, cheered on by a world transfixed, the more hidden struggle of the whale’s survival plays out. It is here at the IWC that mothers and calves are truly at risk. Japan reported a tragic 70 percent of the whales killed in 2006 by its whaling fleet in the Antarctic were pregnant. In 2007, Japan is proposing to add humpbacks to its hunt. And in an eleventh hour move, Denmark has announced its intent to return to whaling, seeking a kill of 2 bowheads, 25 minke, and 10 humpbacks.

Perhaps that is why prayer flags are flying over the IWC. Perhaps that is also why there is a link between a world transfixed by a wounded mother-calf humpback pair and a far-away

conference on whaling. These lost whales are the suddenly visible sub-text of killing quotas and the next generation of whales.

“All things are connected,” Chief Seattle said in another century, at a time when Yankee whaling ships were slaughtering whales to the brink of extinction. And here we are in a 21<sup>st</sup> century still debating whale hunts of fellow mammals who can live to 200 years old, who are known to have unique cultures, families, and dialects.

Humpback whale songs are often described as lullabies passed on between generations. “Sakura” is a lullaby passed on between Japanese generations. In Baja, a newborn whale calf rises up to be embraced by a Japanese mother-daughter pair who sings them a lullaby about cherry blossoms. A gray whale visits Tokyo harbor during cherry blossom festival to cheering throng of Japanese -- and after several days dies. A mother-calf humpback pair struggle up river to return to their sea, while countries debate killing humpbacks. All things are connected.~

Brenda Peterson is the author of 15 books, including *SIGHTINGS: The Gray Whale's Mysterious Journey* (National Geographic Books) and *BETWEEN SPECIES: Celebrating the Dolphin-Human Bond* (Sierra Club/UC Press). Her most recent book is *Animal Heart*.