

Japan firm opens whale meat vending machines to push sales

By Mari Yamaguchi and Kwiyeon Ha
The Associated Press

YOKOHAMA, Japan — A Japanese whaling operator, after struggling for years to promote its products amid protests from conservationists, has found a new way to cultivate clientele and bolster sales: whale meat vending machines.

The Kujira (Whale) Store, an unmanned outlet that recently opened in the port town of Yokohama near Tokyo, houses three machines for whale sashimi, whale bacon, whale skin, and whale steak, as well as canned whale meat. Prices range from 1,000 yen (\$7.70) to 3,000 yen (\$23).

The outlet features white vending machines decorated with cartoon whales and is the third location to launch in the Japanese capital region. It opened in late January after two others were introduced in Tokyo earlier this year as part of Kyodo Senpaku Co.’s new sales drive.

Whale meat has long been a source of controversy but sales in the new vending machines have quietly gotten off to a good start, the operator says. Anti-whaling protests have subsided since Japan in 2019 terminated its much-criticized research hunts in the Antarctic and resumed commercial whaling off the Japanese coasts.

Conservationists say they are worried the move could be a step toward expanded whaling.

“The issue is not the vending machines themselves but what they may lead to,” said Nanami Kurasawa, head of the Iruka & Kujira (Dolphin & Whale) Action Network.

Kurasawa noted the whaling operator is already asking for additional catches and to expand whaling outside of the designated waters.

Kyodo Senpaku hopes to set up vending machines at 100 locations nationwide in five years, company spokesperson Konomu Kubo told The Associated Press. A fourth is to open in Osaka next month.

The idea is to open vending machines near supermarkets, where whale meat is usually unavailable, to cultivate demand, a task crucial for the industry’s survival.

Major supermarket chains have largely stayed away from whale meat to avoid protests by anti-whaling groups and remain cautious even though harassment



from activists has subsided, Kubo said.

“As a result, many consumers who want to eat it cannot find or buy whale meat. We launched vending machines at unmanned stores for those people,” he said.

Company officials say sales at the two Tokyo outlets have been significantly higher than expected, keeping staff busy replenishing products.

At the store in the Motomachi district of Yokohama, a posh shopping area near Chinatown, 61-year-old customer Mami Kashiwabara went straight for whale bacon, her father’s favorite. To her disappointment it was sold out, and she settled for frozen onomi, tail meat that is regarded as a rare delicacy.

Kashiwabara says she is aware of the whaling controversy but that whale meat brings back her childhood memories of eating it at family dinners and school lunches.

“I don’t think it’s good to kill whales meaninglessly. But whale meat is part of Japanese food culture and we can respect the lives of whales by appreciating their meat,” Kashiwabara said. “I would be happy if I can eat it.”

Kashiwabara said she planned to share her purchase of a 3,000 yen (\$23) handy-size chunk, neatly wrapped in a freezer bag, with her husband over saké.

The meat mostly comes from whales caught off Japan’s northeastern coast.

Japan resumed commercial whaling in July 2019 after withdrawing from the International Whaling Commission (IWC), ending 30 years of what it called

research whaling, which had been criticized by conservationists as a cover for commercial hunts banned by the IWC in 1988.

Under its commercial whaling in the Japanese exclusive economic zone, Japan last year caught 270 whales, less than 80% of the quota and fewer than the number it once hunted in the Antarctic and the northwestern Pacific in its research program.

The decline occurred because fewer minke whales were found along the coast. Kurasawa says the reason for the smaller catch should be examined to see if it is linked to overhunting or climate change.

While conservation groups condemned the resumption of commercial whaling, some see it as a way to let the government’s embattled and expensive whaling program adapt to changing times and tastes.

In a show of determination to keep the whaling industry alive in the coming decades, Kyodo Senpaku will construct a 6 billion yen (\$46 million) new mother ship for launch next year to replace the aging *Nisshin Maru*.

But uncertainty remains.

Whaling is losing support in other whaling nations such as Iceland, where only one whaler remains.

Whales may also be moving away from the Japanese coasts due to a scarcity of saury, a staple of their diet, and other fish possibly due to the impact of climate change, Kubo said.

Whaling in Japan involves only a few hundred people and one operator and

after 2020.

The city’s government should “cease its dismantlement of Hong Kong’s democratic institutions, autonomy, and rule of law,” release those held unjustly, and “respect human rights for all,” May said.

In a response, the Chinese Foreign Ministry’s office in Hong Kong said May “slandered the rule of law and freedom in Hong Kong” and “deliberately discredited Hong Kong’s business environment.”

May “recklessly trampled on the basic principle of not interfering with a place’s domestic affairs under international law and international relations,” it said in a statement posted online.

“He supported those who have opposed China and disrupted Hong Kong, and also badmouthed Hong Kong’s development prospects,” the statement said.

The U.S. and other major democracies have been critical of China’s crackdown on political freedoms in the former British colony, which was handed back to China in 1997 with a promise by Beijing to keep western-style liberties under a “one country, two systems” framework.

Hong Kong is among a raft of issues that have sent ties between Beijing and Washington to their lowest level in years, including technology and trade, human rights, threats against Taiwan, and China’s claims in the South China Sea.

WHALING WORRIES. Konomu Kubo, a spokesperson for Kyodo Senpaku Co., explains how whale meat is being sold from a vending machine at the firm’s store in Yokohama, Japan. The Kujira (Whale) Store, an unmanned outlet that recently opened in the port town of Yokohama near Tokyo, houses three machines for whale sashimi, whale bacon, whale skin, and whale steak, as well as canned whale meat. Prices range from 1,000 yen (\$7.70) to 3,000 yen (\$23). (AP Photo/Kwiyeon Ha)

accounted for less than 0.1% of total meat consumption in recent years, according to Fisheries Agency data.

Still, conservative governing lawmakers staunchly support commercial whaling and consumption of the meat as part of Japan’s cultural tradition.

Conservationists say whale meat is no longer part of the daily diet in Japan, especially for younger generations.

Whale meat was an affordable source of protein during Japan’s undernourished years after World War II, with annual consumption peaking at 233,000 tons in 1962.

Whale was quickly replaced by other meats. The whale meat supply fell to 6,000 tons in 1986, the year before the moratorium on commercial whaling imposed by the IWC banned the hunting of several whale species.

Under the research whaling, criticized as a cover for commercial hunts because the meat was sold on the market, Japan caught as many as 1,200 whales annually. It has since drastically cut back its catch after international protests escalated and whale meat supply and consumption slumped at home.

Annual meat supply had fluctuated in a range of 3,000 to 5,000 tons, including imports from Norway and Iceland. The amount further fell in 2019 to 2,000 tons, or 20 grams (less than 1 ounce) of whale meat per person a year, the Fisheries Agency statistics show.

Whaling officials attributed the shrinking supply in the past three years to the absence of imports due to the pandemic, and plan to nearly double this year’s supply with imports of more than 2,500 tons from Iceland.

Japan managed to get Iceland’s only remaining whaler to hunt fin whales exclusively for shipment to Japan, whaling officials said. Iceland caught only one minke whale in the 2021 season, according to the IWC.

Criticizing Iceland’s export to Japan, the International Fund for Animal Welfare said it “opposes all commercial whaling as it is inherently cruel.”

With uncertain outlook for imports, Kyodo Senpaku wants the government to raise Japan’s annual catch quota to levels that can supply about 5,000 tons, which Kubo describes as the threshold to maintain the industry.

“From a long-term perspective, I think it would be difficult to sustain the industry at the current supply levels,” Kubo said. “We must expand both supply and demand, which have both shrunk.”

With the extremely limited supply, whale meat processing cannot be a viable business and may not last for the next generations, he added.

Yuki Okoshi, who started serving whale meat dishes at his Japanese-style seafood restaurant three years ago when higher quality whale meat became available under commercial whaling, said he hopes whale meat supply will stabilize.

Okoshi said “the future of the whale industry depends on whether customers need us” and that whale meat restaurants could hold the key to survival.

“Whaling can be a political issue, but relationships between the restaurant and our customers is very simple,” Okoshi said. “We serve good food at reasonable prices and customers are happy. That’s all there is to it.”

Consul: 20% of Americans in Hong Kong left in past 2 years

By Kanis Leung
The Associated Press

HONG KONG — About 20% of the Americans in Hong Kong have left for various reasons over the past two years, the U.S. consul general in the semi-autonomous Chinese city said, drawing harsh criticism from Beijing for allegedly interfering in its affairs.

Hong Kong’s strict anti-COVID-19 measures and “diminishing freedoms” have “clearly impacted the city and the people in it,” Greg May said, citing the departure of roughly 15,000 Americans as one of the outcomes. He said about 70,000 Americans and 1,300 U.S. companies are currently present in Hong Kong.

In a video address to the U.S. Center for Strategic & International Studies, May also said worries remain over Hong Kong’s “reputation as a business center which depends on adherence to international standards and the rule of law.”

Among those concerns was an interpretation by the standing committee of the National People’s Congress, China’s legislature, that could “further undermine the independence of Hong Kong’s judiciary system by expanding the Hong Kong executive branch’s authority to make decisions affecting cases without judicial oversight,” May said.

The standing committee ruled that Hong Kong’s courts need the approval of the territory’s chief executive or a separate committee to allow foreign lawyers to take part in national security trials.

That came after Hong Kong leader, John Lee, who is under U.S. sanctions, asked Beijing to make a ruling that could effectively block jailed pro-democracy publisher Jimmy Lai from hiring a British lawyer to represent him.

Lai was arrested in 2020 during a crackdown on the city’s pro-democracy movement that led Beijing to impose a sweeping National Security Law on the city. He is fighting collusion charges and faces up to life in prison if convicted.

May said that in light of the standing committee’s ruling and other developments, “companies should be aware that the risks faced in mainland China are now increasingly present here in Hong Kong.”

“The National Security Law and actions taken by Beijing and Hong Kong authorities may negatively impact company staff, finances, legal compliance reputation, and operations,” he said.

Hong Kong’s reputation as a free global financial center could be further harmed if more of the “best and brightest” leave the city, he said, referring to the decision by many Hong Kong citizens to move abroad