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Gallup on Public Attitudes to Whales and Whaling

- Prof. Milton Freeman -

Background

An international study was carried out by the Gallup Organisation to determine how people in six countries view issues related to the management of whales and whaling. This article provides some results contained in *Public Attitudes to Whales: Results of a Six-Country Survey*, published by the Canadian Circumpolar Institute and Yale University School of Forestry and Environmental Studies (August 1992).

A questionnaire consisting of 48 questions was administered to a representative random sample of about 500 adults in each of Australia, England, Germany, Japan and Norway, and 1,000 in the United States. The level of accuracy of the poll results was from 2-4% at a 95% confidence level.

For most questions, respondents were asked to answer on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 indicated strong disapproval or disagreement, and 5 strong approval or agreement with a particular statement; a score of 3, indicated no strong opinion one way or another. Respondents could also indicate they held no opinion or did not know.

This study was co-directed by Professor Stephen Kellert, Associate Dean, School of Forestry and Environmental Studies at Yale University and myself. Funds were sought from each member government represented at the International Whaling Commission. Thirteen replies to these letters were received, and subsequent correspondence with those who indicated interest in the study resulted in most of the funding being obtained from these sources. No government requested changes to the survey questionnaire provided by the researchers. Additional funds needed to complete the study were obtained from research agencies in Canada and the U.S.

Results

- *1) Questions Concerning the Acceptability of Whaling*
Respondents in Australia, England, Germany and the U.S. held opinions markedly different from those expressed by Japanese and Norwegians when each was questioned about whaling.

For example, when asked whether they "opposed the hunting of whales under any circumstances" a sizeable majority of respondents in Australia and Germany agreed (by a two to one margin). However, even larger majorities (two and a half to three to one) in Japan and Norway disagreed with the statement that whales should not be hunted under any circumstances. Opposition to whaling under any circumstances was more moderate in the U.S. (a four to three majority opposing whaling) and even more evenly divided in England with 43% opposed to whaling, 37% not opposed, and a further 19% expressing no strong opinion one way or the other.

In response to the statement that "there is nothing wrong with whaling if it is properly regulated", about two thirds of respondents in Australia and England disagreed, whereas between two-thirds and three-quarters of Japanese and Norwegians respectively agreed that regulated whaling was an acceptable practice. The U.S. position (55% disagreeing with the statement) appeared intermediate between these extremes.

- *2) Policy Questions to be Addressed by a Whaling Authority*
The top policy priority identified by respondents in Australia, England, Germany, Norway and the U.S. was that the most humane methods of hunting be utilized and that strict international controls be put into place.

In Japan respondents placed highest priority on the sustainability of the whale fishery and minimizing wasteful practices.

Respondents in every country indicated high levels of support (80-90%) for the requirement that harvests should be based upon the best scientific advice.

In further question about broad areas of policy to be followed in future management initiatives, all respondents placed protection of the whales' environment (against pollution or industrial disturbance) as the highest goal. There was also high priority accorded in each country to the importance of managing whales in the context of marine ecosystem considerations.

Policies in support of social goals (i.e. maintaining the wellbeing of traditional whaling communities) were afforded relatively high priority in both Japan (59% agreeing, vs. 20% disagreeing) and Norway (56% agreeing, vs. 18% disagreeing) compared to the opinions expressed in Australia, England, Germany and the U.S. where only 30-37% agree with that objective.

However, in respect to maintaining the cultural traditions of whaling communities, responses in England, Norway and the U.S. (44-49%) appeared intermediate between the higher level of support in Japan (59%) and the lower levels of support indicated for this policy goal in both Australia (40%) and Germany (37%).

Norwegian respondents indicated strong support (60% in favour, 15% opposed) for a policy that views whales as a protein food source for human use. This policy enjoyed decreasing levels of support by respondents in Japan (33% opposed, Germany and the

U.S. (44%), England (50%) and Australia (60%). A further series of questions explored respondents attitudes toward the use of different animals as sources of human food.

- *3) People's Attitudes to Different Animal Meats*

It is apparent that answers to questions about the acceptability of producing and consuming various food animals reflect both national as well as respondents' personal ideas about food. Thus, as might be expected, Australians (at 28%) exhibited levels of acceptance of kangaroo meat twice as high as found among Germans, Japanese and Norwegians, and four times as high as found in the U.K. and U.S.

Similarly, whereas very strong disapproval was expressed for eating horseflesh in England and in the U.S. (only 4% and 10% approving), a more tolerant position toward consumption of horseflesh was expressed by Germans (23%), Japanese (26%) and Norwegians (27%).

In the case of eating lamb, Norwegians indicated the highest approval level (81 %) with respondents in Australia (67%) and England (61 %) registering lower approval rates and German and U.S. respondents (both at 45%) and Japanese (40%) even lower levels of approval.

In regard to eating whale meat, very small numbers of Australian, English, German and U.S. respondents indicated approval (2-8%). Considerably higher levels of support for eating whale meat were registered in both Japan (33%) and Norway (37%).

However, in both Japan and Norway those disapproving the use of whale meat were 38% and 41 % respectively, with a further 26% and 21 % respectively registering no strong opinion for or against the production and sale of whale meat. These response rates are quite similar to those registered by U.S. respondents in regard to approval and disapproval of both deer and wildfowl.

The German respondents disapproval rate for whale meat production and sale (at 79%) was about equal to Germans' equally high disapproval rate for eating wildfowl (78%), a food source that Australian, English, Japanese, Norwegian and U.S. respondents find far more acceptable (dis-approval ratings ranging from 32% [in the case of Norway], to 49% [in the case of Australia]).

- *4) People's Knowledge about Whales and Whaling*

Questions were asked to determine respondents factual knowledge about whales' natural history (including estimates of abundance/scarcity) and about whaling and the use of whale products. As expected, many people "Don't know" to many of these questions. For example, in answer to the question "Is the sperm whale the only great whale to use teeth to feed?" in the six countries an average of 40% answered "Don't know".

Higher numbers of people in Australia, England, Germany and the U.S. (65-70%) compared to Japan (50%) and Norway (41 %) incorrectly believe that "all large whale species are currently in danger of extinction".

A similar response pattern emerged in answer to the statement "some whale species have become extinct in modern industrial times", where about 80% of Australian, English, German and U.S. respondents believed, incorrectly, that statement to be true, compared to 65% in Japan and 55% in Norway giving an incorrect answer.

In answer to the statement "Some countries continue to kill more than a thousand whales every year for scientific research" around 70% of Australian, English, and German respondents provided the incorrect answer, as did 67% of U.S. respondents, compared with 40% of Japanese and 34% of Norwegian.

This pattern of correct and incorrect answers was largely repeated throughout the questionnaire sequence dealing with matters of fact. Thus the proportion of Australian (at 44%), German (50%) and English (57%) respondents believing, again incorrectly, that the main reason for whaling is to provide cheap sources of edible oils, is much higher than 22% of Norwegians and 30% of Japanese sharing that belief.

A somewhat similar pattern of incorrect responses is obtained to the statement that most whale meat today is being consumed in expensive Japanese restaurants (where only 14% and 20% of English and German respondents recognised that to be an incorrect statement). However, about half of the U.S. respondents recognised that proposition to be factually untrue.

More Japanese (62%) and U.S. (60%) respondents knew that the blue whale has been protected for a quarter century by international agreement (compared to only 39% of Germans) whereas correct answers to the question about echo-locating abilities of the great whales ranged from 4% (U.K.) to 18% (Japan).

It appears that in each country the general public is decidedly uninformed about whales, whaling and the use of whale products. The average correct score for the six countries was only about 40%, ranging from 31 % (in the U.K.) to 52% (Norway).

- *5) Knowledge Concerning Whale Population Levels*

It is interesting to ask whether widespread opposition to whaling in some countries might be influenced by a belief that "whales are (an) endangered species". In order to obtain data needed to further consider this belief, respondents were asked to indicate where, over a broad range of population numbers, they would place each of the seven species of large (i.e. baleen and sperm whale.)

The level of correct answers was very low: less than 1 % of Germans, about 2% of Australian and English respondents and 6% and 8.5% of U.S. and Norwegian respondents respectively knew that sperm whale numbers (far) exceed 1 million. In Germany about half the respondents believed that there are fewer than 10,000 sperm whales.

In Germany and Australia about half the respondents (60% in the U.S.) believe there are less than 10,000 minke whales in the world, and only about 5% thought that the number

was greater than 100,000. Respondents in Japan and Norway were three to four times as likely to select a correct answer for minke whale population levels compared to those in Australia, England, Germany, or the U.S.

Conclusions

From the results presented and discussed in this report some general conclusions can be offered at this time.

1. Substantial differences appear to exist between public attitudes toward whale management and use in the four nonwhaling countries where wide-spread opposition to whaling is found, and the two whaling countries where only a minority opposes whaling. (Alaskan whaling is ignored when characterizing the U.S. as a non-whaling country for the purpose of this study).
 2. There appears to be common agreement in all six countries regarding the great importance of (i) protecting whale habitat from pollution and disturbance, (ii) maintaining an ecosystem perspective in whale management, and (iii) basing harvest levels upon the best scientific advice.
 3. Though there exists widespread opposition to whaling in the non-whaling countries, in the event that whaling is carried out in the future, respondents in most countries place high priority on ensuring that whales be killed in as humane a fashion as its technologically possible and that strict international inspection of whaling be in effect.
 4. In further regard to whale management policy, the public in all countries appear to place least importance upon strictly economic goals in comparison to environmental goals.
 5. In regard to the acceptability of producing and selling whale meat for human consumption, considerable differences exist between the two whaling countries on the one hand, and the four non-whaling countries on the other. Thus whale meat received the highest disapproval ratings of any meats in the four non-whaling countries; in the two whaling countries whale meat enjoyed neither high approval nor disapproval ratings.
 6. The public in each country appears to have only a limited amount of accurate knowledge concerning whales and issues related to whaling. However, somewhat greater knowledge was possessed by the public in the two countries (Japan and Norway) where support for whaling is strongest.
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