

## **Fear for Humpbacks as Japan Whaling Fleet Sets Sail**

JAPAN: November 19, 2007

**TOKYO - A Japanese whaling fleet left on Sunday for an expedition that activists say will for the first time target humpbacks, a perennial favourite among whale-watchers.**

A fleet of ships led by the 8,000-tonne Nisshin Maru left Shimonoseki port in southwestern Japan for the Antarctic Ocean around midday on an outing that operators say is for research purposes.

Environmental activist group Greenpeace said the fleet's mission is to hunt whales for commercial purposes, adding that its Esperanza campaign ship was in waters off Japan, waiting to intercept the fleet in the coming days to demand its return home.

Japan, which says whaling is a cherished cultural tradition, abandoned commercial whaling in accordance with an international moratorium in 1986, but began the next year to conduct what it calls scientific research whaling.

"Although we are subjected to vicious blocking tactics by environmental groups, we have to continue this into the future," Kyodo News quoted Hajime Ishikawa, a leader of the research team, as saying at a departure ceremony earlier in the day.

Greenpeace said that if the fleet fails to heed its demands to return home, the Esperanza will follow the expedition into southern waters to protest against the hunt.

"It's clearly commercial whaling in disguise and the aim for the Japanese government is to restart commercial whaling," Karli Thomas, the Esperanza's expedition leader, told Reuters by phone from aboard the ship. "There's a moratorium against commercial whaling, and that needs to be enforced."

Whale meat ends up in Japanese supermarkets and restaurants, but appetite is fading for what is now considered a delicacy.

### **HUMPBCKS, FIN WHALES**

The fleet aims to catch around 850 minke whales, which Japan says are now abundant enough to take, in addition to some 50 fin whales, which environmentalists say are endangered, and 50 humpbacks, which are favourites of whale-watchers for their distinctive silhouettes and acrobatic leaps from the water.

The fleet's departure was postponed to Sunday from Nov. 15 to avoid causing friction during a meeting between Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda and US President George W. Bush that took place on Friday, Greenpeace said.

Japanese fisheries officials were unavailable for comment on Sunday, but the nation has long argued that its whaling programme promotes the understanding of whale stocks and species, and officials have protested the activities of environmental organisations.

Japan abandoned its last Antarctic whale-hunting season earlier this year after fire crippled the Nisshin Maru, killing one crew member. That expedition netted a haul of around 500 whales.

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