Japan will resume commercial whaling. Get the facts.

Japan is pulling out of the International Whaling Commission. Here’s how it works and what it means.

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Editor's note, July 1, 2019: For the first time in more than 30 years, Japan has resumed commercial whale hunting. On July 1, a fleet of five ships set sail in the morning and returned in the afternoon with two minke whales. This year’s quota has been set at 227 Bryde’s, minke, and sei whales.

Japan has decided to withdraw from the International Whaling Commission (IWC) and resume whaling in its coastal waters, a government spokesman confirmed. The commission, with 89 member governments, was established in 1946 to conserve whales and manage whaling around the world. It banned commercial whaling in 1986.

Although Japan is the main market for whale meat, consumption there is limited—about an ounce per person per year, or about 4,000 to 5,000 tons, according to a report by the Animal Welfare Institute, a nonprofit that seeks to alleviate animal suffering, and the Environmental Investigation Agency, which tracks international wildlife crime.

According to Astrid Fuchs, whaling program manager for the U.K.-based nonprofit Whale and Dolphin Conservation, who spoke to National Geographic before the news was confirmed, Japan’s withdrawal would primarily be a political move, sending the message that the country can use the oceans as they please. (Learn more about how the international community recently moved to stop Japan from hunting sei whales.)

“For decades Japan has aggressively pursued a well-funded whaling campaign to upend the global ban on commercial whaling,” says Kitty Block, president of Humane Society International. “It has consistently failed but instead of accepting that most nations no longer want to hunt whales, it has now simply walked out.”

Because Japan is a leading voice among pro-whaling countries, Fuchs says, its withdrawal may inspire other countries, such as South Korea and Russia, to follow suit. (Read how whales are deliberately hunted 'by accident' in some countries.)

Under the ban, whaling for scientific purposes—biologists studying reproductive status, stomach contents, and effects of
Japan will resume commercial whaling and leave the IWC. Get the facts.

Environmental change, for example—is exempt. Japan has long been accused of using that exemption as a cover, with whalers supplying some body parts to researchers and selling the rest of the meat for human consumption.

“They’ve been thumbing their nose at the moratorium and the will of international citizens for a long time,” Block says.

In a vote this summer during the commission’s annual meeting, Japan’s proposal to allow commercial whaling was rejected.

“They put a lot of money into it,” Fuchs says. “Part of the government really expected that they might be able to swing the mood with some countries at the meeting.”

After the meeting, officials, including Masaaki Taniai, vice minister for fisheries, and Joji Morishita, Japan’s IWC commissioner, said they’d consider withdrawing from the commission—a threat Japan has made in the past.

Fuchs predicted that this time was different. “It very much [sounded] like they’re actually doing it,” she said earlier.

Block agreed. “When they don’t get their way at these international meetings, they say they’re going to leave, and they’ve been making that idle threat for many, many years now. This time [seemed] to be a little more vociferous.”

By withdrawing from the commission, Japan can no longer take advantage of the IWC’s exemption for scientific whaling in international waters and would therefore have to halt whaling on the high seas. That’s because the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas requires its signatories, which include Japan, to work through “the appropriate international organizations” for marine mammal conservation. That’s widely interpreted by legal scholars to mean the IWC—even if a country is not party to the IWC. The one benefit Japan gets by withdrawing is it could likely resume whaling in its own backyard without oversight.

This would be beneficial for whales in Antarctica—where Japan killed upwards of 300 in 2016, including more than 200 pregnant females—but bad for species in Japanese waters.

There’s particular concern about the status of minke whales called the J-stock, found off the coast of Japan and frequently hunted. Minke whales are targeted because they’re relatively abundant, not having been decimated during commercial whaling’s peak years during the 1970s.

If Japan were to be more open about its intent to continue commercial whaling, it might simplify things in some ways, says Natalie Barefoot, a University of Miami law professor and expert in whale law.

“We’re having this dialogue essentially pretending that they’re performing scientific research,” she says. “If they change their position and say, ‘Hey, we are, this is what we’re doing. We are commercial whaling’—in some ways, it’s a bit of a relief, because we can have an actual honest conversation on their activities in ocean waters.”

By Japan withdrawing from the commission, it will face no formal consequences, but other countries could take matters into their own hands and impose sanctions—for example, by denying Japan access to fishing in their waters. It also means that Japan would no longer be a part of the international dialogue on whaling.

“As we become an increasingly global community, it’s better to have everyone at the table, even if you disagree, and just to continue to work,” Barefoot says. “These are global issues we’re addressing, and we need to address them together.”

According to commission spokesperson Kate Wilson, in order for Japan to bow out by the end of June 2019, it would need to send formal notification of withdrawal to the U.S. State Department, which would inform the commission secretariat, by January 1.
A representative from the U.S. embassy in Japan was not immediately available for comment.

The timing of this latest intimation by Japan of its withdrawal from the commission may not be coincidental, Fuchs says. With the holidays season, they may expect less opposition.

This story was originally published on Dec. 21, 2018, under the headline, “Japan may resume commercial whaling. Get the facts.” The story was updated Dec. 26 when the Japanese government confirmed the country is leaving the IWC and again on July 1, 2019, after whaling officially began.

Wildlife Watch is an investigative reporting project between National Geographic Society and National Geographic Partners focusing on wildlife crime and exploitation. Read more Wildlife Watch stories here, and learn more about National Geographic Society’s nonprofit mission at nationalgeographic.org. Send tips, feedback, and story ideas to ngwildlife@natgeo.com.

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"The resumption of commercial whaling has been an ardent wish for whalers across the country," the head of the agency, Shigeto Hase, said at a departure ceremony in northern Kushiro for the small fleet. He said the resumption of whaling would ensure "the culture and way of life will be passed on to the next generation." Why Japan is restarting commercial whaling. Could the ban on killing whales end? Pro-whaling nations block sanctuary plan. "My heart is overflowing with happiness, and I'm deeply moved," said Yoshifumi Kai, head of the Japan Small-Type Whaling Association. "People have hunted ... Japan said Wednesday it is withdrawing from the International Whaling Commission and will resume commercial whaling next year, sparking criticism from activists and anti-whaling countries including Australia. The announcement comes after Japan failed earlier this year to convince the IWC to allow it to resume commercial whaling. "Whaling is an outdated and unnecessary practice. We continue to hope Japan eventually reconsider its position and will cease all whaling," he said. Japan has hunted whales for centuries, and the meat was a key source of protein in the immediate post-World War II years when the country was desperately poor. It makes no secret however of the fact that meat from the expeditions ends up on dinner tables. Japan will withdraw from the International Whaling Commission and resume commercial whaling in Japanese waters in 2019, shunning a decades-old ban. Source: CNN. Stories worth watching (16 Videos). Japan will resume commercial whaling in 2019. Dick Parsons: Georgia law is a bald-faced attempt to suppress Black vote. 'Godzilla vs. Kong' is a pandemic box office hit. 5 ways to cut your plastic waste. Following years of "scientific" whaling, Japan's whalers will resume commercial operations in 2019, according to a government decision. It defies a 1986 international moratorium on hunting endangered species. Yoshihide Suga, chief cabinet secretary, assured the public that commercial whaling will be limited to Japan's territorial waters and exclusive economic zones. He said the country's ships will not hunt in the Antarctic or in the southern hemisphere, which was the main source of concern for Australia. The announcement was not surprising, as it comes after the IWC declined Japan's request to allow its fishermen to hunt minke and other whales protected by the organization. But environmentalists accused Tokyo of using a "sneaky" timing to avoid condemnation. Japan will resume commercial whale hunting immediately after it leaves the International Whaling Commission in July (Pictured, a minke whale is lifted from a ship at Kushiro port in Hokkaido, northern Japan). A ship owned by the fisheries association in Taiji - known for its annual dolphin hunts - will contribute one vessel to the fleet which will hunt minke whales near Hachinohe or Kushiro in northern Japan. Each vessel will then head south to Chiba, near Tokyo, while making several stops before heading back to Kushiro for more hunts later in the year, Japan's national broadcaster NHK sa