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Whaling: Don't Trade the Moratorium Away

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In their proposal to allocate 'whale shares' to both whalers and conservationists as an alternative to the International Whaling Commission (IWC) moratorium on commercial whaling, Christopher Costello and colleagues overlook several factors (Nature 481, 139–140; 2012).

Commercial whaling is in decline. In Japan, it is becoming less economically viable as consumer demand and whalemeat sales revenues fall — even with an increasing government subsidy, which this year is roughly ¥2.3 billion (US\$30 million). Demand is also waning in Iceland and Norway. A ban on international trade prevents these countries from securing new markets. Last year, the global stockpile of unwanted whale meat reached more than 7,000 tonnes.

The effective management of commercial whaling would cost a lot more than its protagonists can afford and than non-whaling nations are willing to pay.

Costello *et al.* also overlook the high costs of the independent surveys and analysis that would be needed to generate safe quotas for whaling, as well as the international compliance scheme required to enforce regulations.

The IWC's founding treaty does not allow for quotas to be allocated to individual countries. Its renegotiation to facilitate a scheme such as Costello and colleagues describe would require unanimity, which is currently unthinkable. Given all this, it would be foolhardy to trade away the moratorium.

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