

Save Whales Not Whaling

Human Health Concerns

There is no doubt that whaling isn't good for whales. What most people don't know—and what pro-whaling nations such as Japan and Norway don't want to consider—is that eating whale meat may be a human health hazard.

TOP OF THE FOOD CHAIN

Pro-whaling nations insist that whale meat is healthier than beef. But the truth is that whales are particularly vulnerable to environmental contaminants, including organochlorines—such as polychlorinated biphenyl (PCBs), dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT), and dioxin—and heavy metals—such as methylmercury.

Each of these environmental contaminants tends to bioaccumulate in top predators, including sperm whales, orcas, pilot whales, and false killer whales. For these animals, each step up the food chain results in a greater concentration of these poisons in fewer and fewer individuals.

In some whale species, contaminants have been found in blubber at levels far in excess of what is considered safe. The most contaminated whale meat has come from those species that are fish or mammal eaters such as dolphins, porpoises, sperm whales, and beaked whales.

Baleen whales, such as minkes, feed lower on the food chain. As a result, their tissues generally contain lower levels of contaminants. However, tests of the blubber of minke whales from the north Pacific have shown unsafe levels of pesticides and PCBs.

EFFECTS ON HUMANS

Whale meat or blubber is consumed in Norway, Japan, some Caribbean nations, Russia, Canada, and the U.S. state of Alaska—either for subsistence, cultural, or commercial reasons. A few aboriginal cultures rely heavily on whale meat as a source of protein, while others consume only small amounts commercially.

Although not dependent on it as a source of protein, the Japanese are one of the world's largest consumers of whale meat. In Japanese markets, generic whale meat or "kujira" is said to come from the minke whales killed as part of the so-called scientific whaling program. This meat should contain relatively low levels of contaminants. However, tests have shown that not all kujira is minke whale meat. Some of it is dolphin, porpoise, or beaked whale meat. People who eat kujira, thinking they are avoiding unsafe levels of contaminants, may in fact be eating meat that contains very high levels of toxic substances.

The effects of environmental contaminants in humans are very serious. PCBs can cause neurotoxicity (nerve damage), reproductive and developmental disorders, immune system suppression, liver damage, skin irritation, and endocrine disruption. DDT exposure is associated with certain cancer risks and neurological and reproductive disorders. Dioxins, among the most toxic substances known, can cause cancer, metabolic dysfunction, and immune system disorders. Methylmercury consumption can cause neurological and developmental problems. The contaminants are often most highly concentrated in blubber because they are lipophilic, meaning they bond easily and even preferentially to fat.

Relying on whale meat as a source of protein is not only dangerous for adults eating the meat, but it also may be unhealthy for their children. One study of Faroe Islanders detected developmental disorders in children with prenatal exposure to PCBs—their mothers consumed pilot whale meat and blubber regularly during pregnancy—versus those without exposure to PCBs—their mothers did not consume pilot whale meat and blubber or only consumed them in very small quantities during pregnancy. In addition, some Inuit communities in the Canadian and Alaskan Arctic—where mothers regularly consume beluga whale meat and blubber (as well as meat from bowhead whales, seals, and polar bears)—have detected health problems in children who were exposed to contaminants in utero and through breast milk.

Whales no longer live in a pristine environment; we have polluted their habitat with poisons that concentrate in their tissues. Regardless of the amount, the consumption of whale meat can expose humans to dangerous contaminants.

Promoting the protection of all animals

**THE HUMANE SOCIETY
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