



## WHO and FAO discuss health risks to consumers of whale, dolphin and porpoise meat for the first time – Japan is one of the most affected countries

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Geneva/Tokyo: This week the *World Health Organisation* WHO and the *Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations* (FAO) are holding an expert consultation on the risks of fish consumption and – encouraged by a coalition of environmental groups – for the first time the health risks associated with consuming contaminated meat and blubber from whales dolphins and porpoises (cetaceans).

Within the last decade numerous scientific findings have been published, clearly showing extremely high levels of mercury, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) and other toxic substances in cetacean products on sale for human consumption. During this period scientists have also found a strong correlation between the consumption of cetacean meat with a variety of human diseases, including Parkinson’s disease, arteriosclerosis, immune subsystem suppression, and hypertension. Threats to children include autism, Asperger’s Syndrome and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

In Japan, up to 20,000 toothed cetaceans in addition to over 1,000 large baleen whales are annually hunted and consumed. Toothed cetaceans mainly feed at the top of a complex marine food web and therefore may accumulate particularly high levels of toxic substances. It has also been found, however, that minke whales, which are a filter species, typically feed lower down the food web can also carry PCB-levels above Japan’s own safety limits.

“Despite the overwhelming scientific findings that cetacean products can pose a risk to human health they remain on sale throughout Japan and are even distributed to some Japanese schools as part of the obligatory school lunch programme” states Clare Perry of the Environmental Investigation Agency and coordinator of an international coalition of groups concerned about cetacean hunting and related health risks.

Sakae Hemmi of the Japan based NGO Elsa Nature Conservancy said: “*It is time for our government to stop the sale of cetacean products and properly inform consumers about these health risks. So far up to 90 percent of the Japanese citizens are not aware of these risks.*”

Only recently Japanese scientists published new findings that show mercury levels in citizens of the Japanese whaling town Taiji up to 25 times higher than Japan’s average. In November a joint letter by Japanese consumer and food safety groups and international conservation organisations called on Japan’s Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama and his Minister of Consumer Affairs and Food Safety to prohibit the sale of polluted cetacean products.

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### **Editors Notes**

Evidence of the contamination of toothed whale, dolphin and porpoise products in Japan is widely available, including the following publications:

Endo, T. and Haraguchi, K. 2010. High mercury levels in hair samples from residents of Taiji, a Japanese whaling town. *Marine Pollution Bulletin* in press.

Endo, T., Hotta, Y., Haraguchi, K., and Sakata, M. 2003. Mercury Contamination in the Red Meat of Whales and Dolphins Marketed for Human Consumption in Japan. *Environ. Sci. Technol.*, **2003**, 37 (12), pp 2681–2685. Available at <http://pubs.acs.org/doi/abs/10.1021/es034055n>

Poisonous Policies – Japan's failure to stop the sale of polluted whale, dolphin and porpoise products. Available in Japanese and English at <http://www.eia-international.org/campaigns/species/cetaceans/reports/>

Toxic Menu – Contamination of whale meat and impact on consumers' health. Available at [www.prowildlife.de/sites/default/files/toxic menue\\_lowres.pdf](http://www.prowildlife.de/sites/default/files/toxic%20menue_lowres.pdf)

Mercury Contamination is Threatening Our Dining Table – An Investigative Report. Available in English and Japanese, [www.elsaenc.net/](http://www.elsaenc.net/)

Link to AERA magazine article (subscription): <http://www.aera-net.jp/latest/backdetail.html?id=111>

Link to open letter (English): <http://www.eia-international.org/files/reports187-1.pdf>

Link to the open letter (Japanese): <http://www.eia-international.org/files/reports188-1.pdf>