



PRESS RELEASE

NEW MERCURY TREATY TO FLAG THREATS TO HUMAN HEALTH OF TOXIC WHALE & DOLPHIN MEAT

LONDON: As the world’s first legally binding international treaty to curb the release of mercury into the environment was formally signed today (October 9), a coalition of NGOs urged countries to take immediate steps to address communities at particular risk of contamination from the consumption of whale and dolphin products.

“For far too long, coastal communities around the world have been allowed to consume the mercury-contaminated meat of whales, dolphins and porpoises, many in ignorance of the risks involved,” said Clare Perry, Senior Campaigner at the UK- and US-based Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA).

“Now signatories to the new treaty must make communities in places as far afield as Japan and the Faroe Islands properly aware of the very serious risks to human health that come from eating the meat of toothed cetaceans.”

The Minamata Convention on Mercury was today adopted at the Conference of Plenipotentiaries in Minamata and Kumamoto, Japan. The choice of venue is significant as Minamata was the scene of the world’s worst-ever incident of mass mercury poisoning. The outbreak began in 1956 after methylmercury, discharged into the sea from a Chisso Corporation factory, accumulated in fish and shellfish and found its way into the human food chain.

Symptoms of mercury poisoning can include loss of muscular coordination, numbness in extremities, damage to hearing and speech, damage to foetal development, paralysis and death.

Dolphin meat sold for consumption in Japan has been found to have mercury levels as high as 98.9 parts per million, some 250 times higher than the Government

regulatory level and higher than levels commonly found in the fish that caused Minamata disease.

“Governments have long been well aware of the dangers to human health that come from eating whale and dolphin meat contaminated with mercury and other pollutants, but in some cases they have been neglectfully reticent when it comes to properly protecting their citizens from the risks,” said Sakae Hemmi, of Japanese NGO Elsa Nature Conservancy.

Based on more than 20 years of medical studies in the Faroe Islands, scientists now advise that the meat of pilot whales killed there is no longer suitable for consumption – but Government recommendations have failed to follow such advice. In 2012, the International Whaling Commission (IWC) passed a consensus resolution noting such concerns and urging governments to take action.

Birgith Sloth, of the Society for the Conservation of Marine Mammals in Denmark, added: “Increasing awareness of the scientific advice has led to many in the Faroes rejecting pilot whale meat. Despite this, more than 1,300 pilot whales and white-sided dolphins have been killed in the Faroe Islands in 2013, suggesting that some people are consuming huge amounts of whale and dolphin meat. The Faroese Government needs to follow the advice of its own scientists and enforce a strict ban on consuming toxic whale meat”.

Interviews are available on request; please contact:

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The NGO coalition comprises Environmental Investigation Agency (UK & US), Animal Welfare Institute (USA), Campaign Whale (UK), Elsa Nature Conservancy (Japan), OceanCare (Switzerland), ProWildlife (Germany) and Society for the Conservation of Marine Mammals (Denmark).

EDITORS' NOTES

1. See www.toxic-menu.org (hosted by OceanCare and ProWildlife), an online library of scientific information on toxic cetacean products.
2. As a result of the Minamata outbreak, as of 2001 Japan had recorded 2,265 official cases of mercury and mercury compound poisoning, of which 1,784 had already died.
3. The Faroe Islands' Chief Scientist and Chief Medical Officer have recommended pilot whale should no longer be consumed due to the threat from pollutants in the meat and blubber – <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3417701/#!po=2.77778>
4. The studies in the Faroe Islands have so far shown that:
 - Mercury from pilot whale meat adversely affects the foetal development of the nervous system;
 - The mercury effect is still detectable during adolescence;
 - The mercury from the maternal diet affects the blood pressure of children;
 - The risk of hypertension and arteriosclerosis of the carotid arteries is increased in adults who have an increased exposure to mercury.
5. Article 16 of the Minamata Convention encourages Parties to:

- Promote the development and implementation of strategies and programmes to identify and protect populations at risk, particularly vulnerable populations, and which may include adopting science-based health guidelines relating to the exposure to mercury and mercury compounds, setting targets for mercury exposure reduction, where appropriate, and public education, with the participation of public health and other involved sectors;
- Promote appropriate health-care services for prevention, treatment and care for populations affected by the exposure to mercury or mercury compounds;
- Establish and strengthen, as appropriate, the institutional and health professional capacities for the prevention, diagnosis, treatment and monitoring of health risks related to the exposure to mercury and mercury compounds.

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