

1. Is Pacific saury in decline?

At the 58th Annual Meeting of International Whaling Commission, Joji Morishita, the alternative delegate for Japan, who is also the Fisheries Negotiator of the Fisheries Agency International Department, said the following:

Since around the time the ban on commercial whaling was imposed, the total catch of the Japanese fisheries has been decreasing. It can then be surmised that there is a connection between our poor haul and the ban on whaling and the consequent increase of food consumption of whales. (Unofficial translation)

In this statement he is painting a very simplistic view: that unless we hunt these whales they will multiply and threaten our marine resources.

The Japanese government has also showed footage of minke whales eating Pacific saury right beside saury fishing boats. There are pictures showing a stomach of minke whale filled with Pacific saury in the documents which the Fisheries Agency published to promote whaling. This might have convinced some people that whales were indeed the cause for our poor haul of Pacific saury. However, the reality is not so simple.

According to the National Pacific Saury Association's recent report, the total catch of Pacific saury is showing trends between 200,000t to 260,000t. (See the attached graph for the total Pacific saury catch.)

Although in 1998 and 1999 the catch declined to less than 200,000t, this could be described as merely a 'poor catch', because for a decade preceding these years - immediately following the ban on commercial whaling - the catch showed a robust volume of 200,000t to 300,000t. During a poor catch year, the price of a Pacific saury fish can be over 130 yen even during the peak season. However, in a year of a good haul a large fatty saury can be sold for less than 100yen.

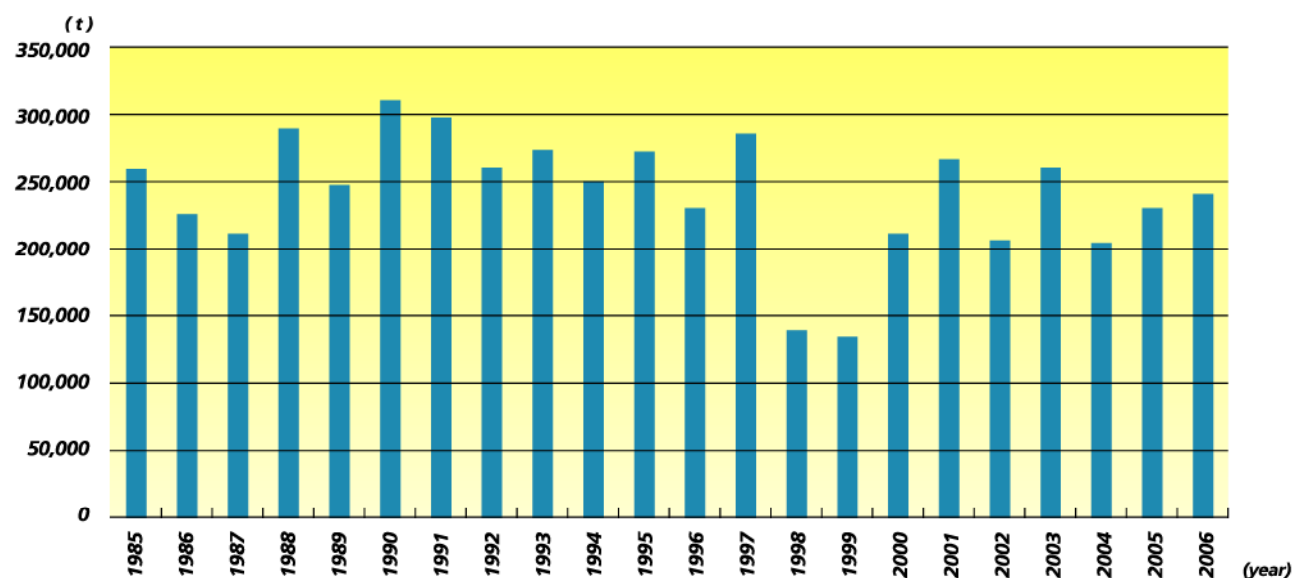
The saury fisheries abide by the quota set by the Total Allowable Catch (TAC) system which came into effect in 1997. This system was introduced to set the upper catch limit to ensure the sustainable use of marine resources, but it has another role for the Pacific saury catch. If the fishermen were to catch more than this limit that would cause the lowering of income due to the lowering of the fish price as a result of the huge increase in supply. So, in a year of a heavy haul, once the stockrooms on the ships are filled they return to the harbor and take a '24 hour rest period' or '48 hour rest period', without heading to the fish market straight away with their catch. The rest period is there to control the supply level, and is directed by the fishing industry.

The main fishing grounds for Pacific saury extend from Boso peninsula to Chiba Prefecture on the south to the Chishima island to Hokkaido in the north, extending along the coast into the far sea. A recent study shows that the further one goes offshore, the larger the number of Pacific saury. However, when or where such a dense fishing ground appears, it can shift from year to year.

In short, the saury catch hasn't declined since the installment of the ban on commercial whaling. The National Pacific Saury Association in fact applies the theory given by the Fisheries Research Agency (NPO)(Tohoku National Fisheries Research Institute, Hachinohe Branch Resource Ecology Research Division) that stated that the saury population was entering the resource fluctuation period. (For more about this, refer to: <http://www.samma.jp/sanma.htm>)

Of course it is not to say that minke whales are not causing fishermen any trouble at all. To name a few, the damaging of tools, bruising of fish obliging the fishermen to be more careful in the selection of their products, and the maneuvering of vessels around whales does amount to a reasonable annoyance. However, could the resumption of commercial whaling really solve these problems? That seems a little unrealistic as well as extreme. It is more sensible to come up with countermeasures such as developing whale deterrent technology. As a last result, similar to how it is done with terrestrial wildlife management, some problem whales may be considered for 'eradication', but not without exhausting preventative countermeasures first. The reopening of a commercial whaling as a cure for the saury-whale conflict (if that exists) is too farfetched and unreasonable.

Annual haul of Pacific saury around Japan coastal area



Source: National Pacific Saury Association

2. Domestic production of major seafood groups and Japanese sardine resources

Whales are eating up all the fish? NO WAY!!

Then why does the Japanese Government insist that the decline of the fish population is linked to the moratorium? I looked for the answer in the data issued by the government and the National Research Institute of Fisheries, Science, Fisheries research Agency(NRIFS), an agency that belongs to the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries.

First, please refer to figure 2: Domestic production of major seafood groups and Japanese sardine resources. This figure depicts the change in the amount of fish hauled by the Japanese fisheries. It does not include any imports, but because it includes all Japanese-registered vessels, some harvests outside of Japanese waters are also included.

The total catch in recent years are now below 10million tons. The pink vertical line labels the year the moratorium was put into place. According to this graph, the Japanese sardine and Walleye Pollock constitute a large portion of the domestic catch, and following them are mackerels, soles, yellow-fin horse mackerel, Japanese anchovy and Japanese common squid. Others, consisting of over 10 species, make up for 1700 to 1800 tons caught annually. What else is shown here is that Walleye Pollock started to decline around 1972, and Japanese sardine started to decline around 1988. Overall, the total decline of fish catch can be attributed to the decline in the Japanese sardine catch.

The established theory for the decline of the sardine catch, however, is not about over-fishing, not about whales, but is a natural phenomenon. What is now known as 'Species Replacement' occurs for mass-caught fish species, such as sardines and mackerels, where populations fluctuate drastically over a 3 to 10 year cycle.

EX1: 'The recourse management of fluctuating offshore resources' (Akihiko Yatsu NRIFS revised ib March, 2003)

<http://cse.fra.affrc.go.jp/yatsu/alkensyu/ABC0206RS2.pdf>

*The report shows that the decline of Japanese sardine is not from over fishing but from the Regime Shift. (Regime Shift: the change in the ecosystem structure.)

EX2: 'Maiwashi no nazo' (Mystery of Japanese sardin)

National Reserch institute of Fisheries science, Fisheries Research Agency Kuroshio and Ecology Research

<http://labcahn.job.affrc.go.jp/pr/Maiwashi0302/Index-sar.htm>

EX3: 'Fish Information- Everything about Fish'

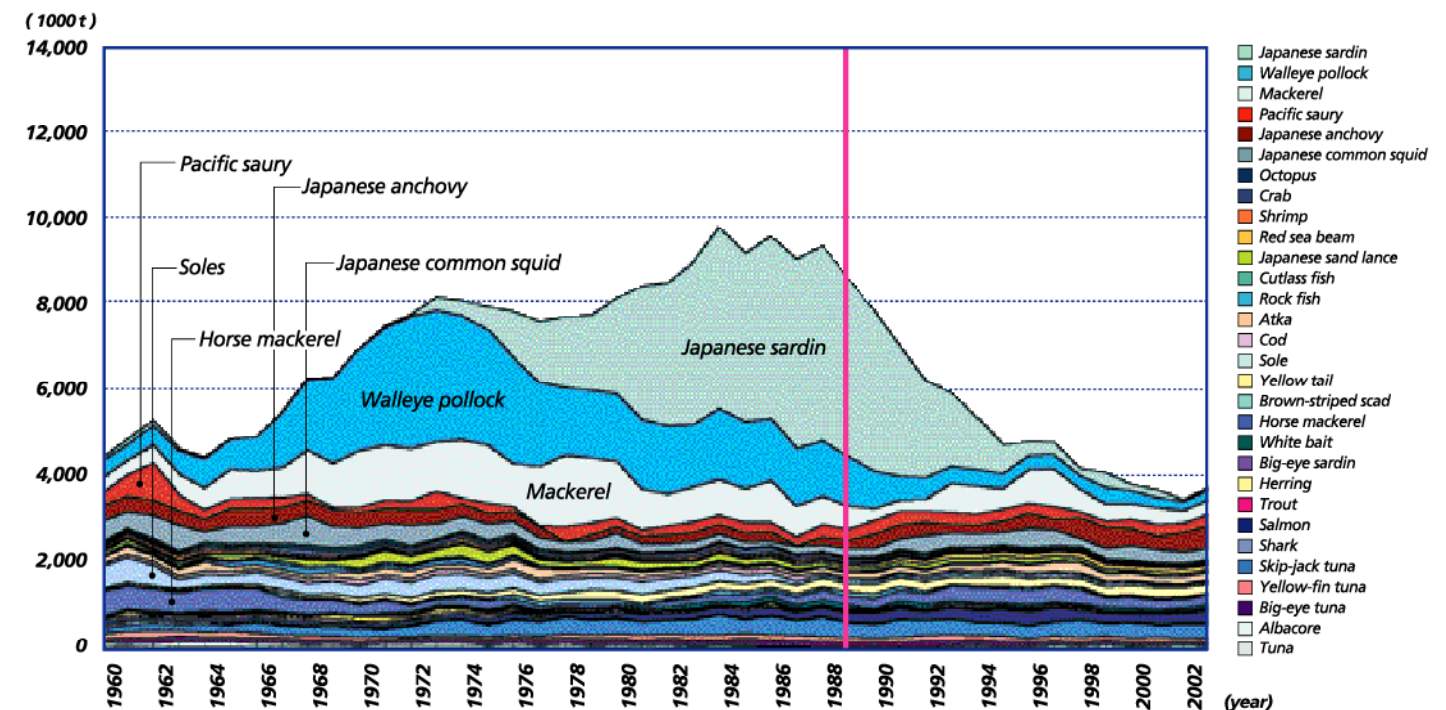
Prefecture of Kanagawa Fisheries and Fisheries General Research Center

<http://www.agri.pref.kanagawa.jp/suisoken/Sakana/Misc/Maiwasi/#chap-5>

Therefore, interpreting the mere overlapping years for the sardine decline and the start of moratorium seems to be a little imperceptive of a theory.

Furthermore, what is preventing Japanese sardines from recovering is not whales but very likely the fishing industry. When Japanese sardines were abundant, the quota was set to 20% of the known population, and when the stock became deprived, people kept catching the sardines with the new quota set at 50% of a population that was already shrinking. As one can expect, Kawai (2003) reported that this heavy fishing pressure on the population was hindering the recovery of the sardine.

Domestic production of major seafood groups and Japanese sardine resources



Source: Table. Statistics on Fisheries and Fish Farming Productivities