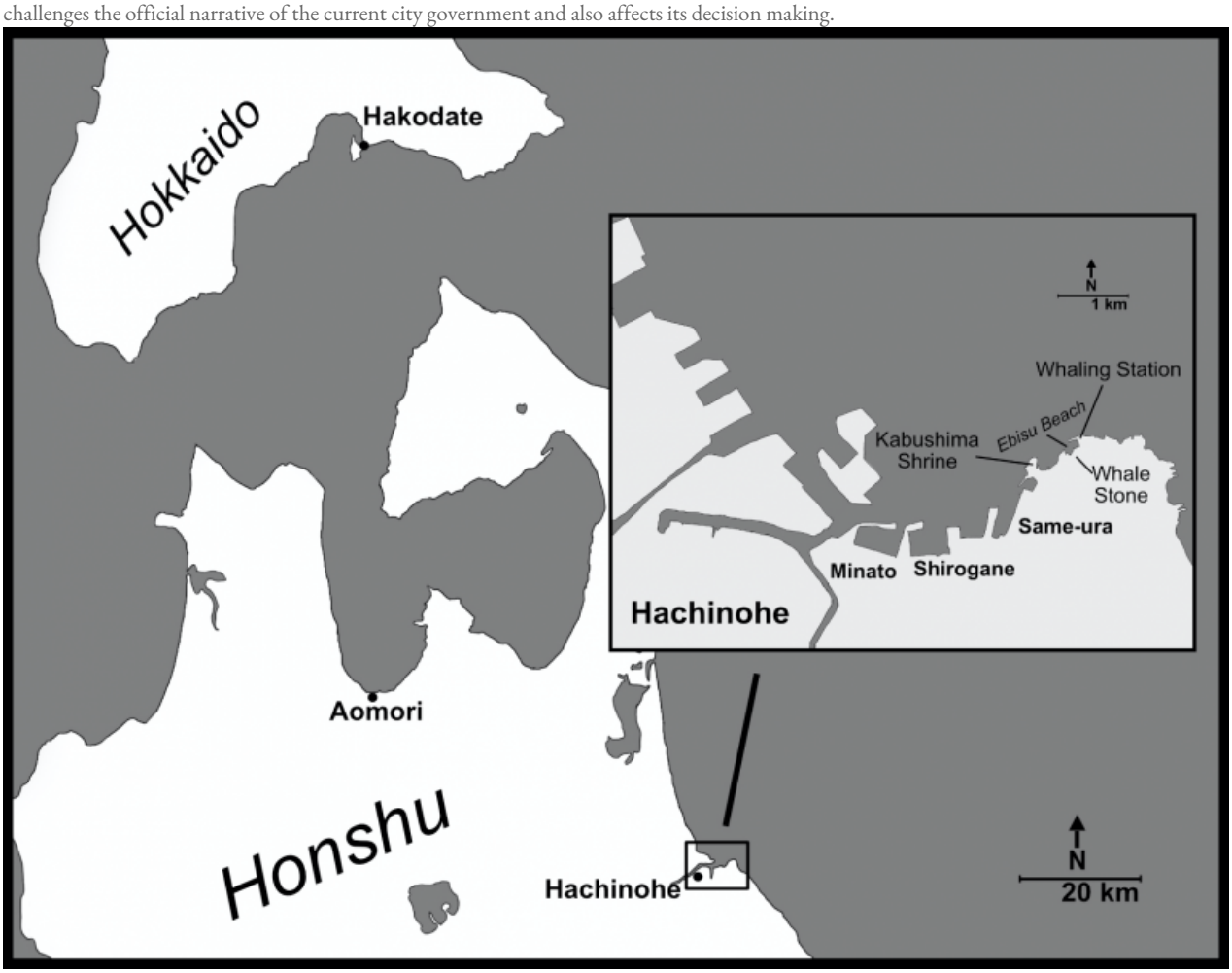
The Polluted Past of the Whaling Town Hachinohe

Fynn Holm

Summary

Invoking its long history with whales, the port city Hachinohe plans to reintroduce commercial whaling after Japan's withdrawal from the International Whaling Commission in 2019. However, a century earlier, in 1911, industrial whaling had caused widespread environmental pollution in Hachinohe, leading to the largest Japanese anti-whaling protests and the destruction of the local whaling station. This troubled past challenges the official narrative of the current city government and also affects its decision making.



Northern Honshu and the Hachinohe region.

Map by Fynn Holm

On 4 January 2019, only a few weeks after the Japanese government unexpectedly announced that the country

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would withdraw from the International Whaling Commission (IWC) and restart commercial whaling after a 31-year hiatus, the mayor of the port city Hachinohe expressed hopes that his city could become the nucleus for future Japanese whaling. He explained that "From old, Hachinohe city has had a whale culture." Indeed, whales have played an essential role in the cultural and economic history of the region for centuries; however, Hachinohe's relationship with whales is much more ambiguous than the words of the mayor suggest. A little more than one hundred years ago, on 1 November 1911, the largest anti-whaling riots in Japanese history struck the region, leading to the destruction of the local whaling station and the death of two rioters. As I argue in this essay, Hachinohe's complicated relationship with whaling, while not acknowledged officially, still plays an underlying role in the city's current push to reinvent itself as one of the leading Japanese whaling towns.

Typical scene of a whale flensing at a Japanese whaling station in 1910 (Ayukawa, Miyagi Prefecture).

Photograph by Roy Chapman Andrews, 1910.
Courtesy of the American Museum of Natural History.

Hachinohe is a port city with over 220,000 inhabitants on the Pacific Coast in Aomori Prefecture, the most

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northern prefecture of Japan's largest island Honshu. In the Edo period (1600–1868), sardine fisheries were one of the most important local industries around Hachinohe. Fin, sei, and minke whales always closely followed the sardine schools there in early summer. From folktales and official documents, we know that the locals referred to the whales as "Ebisu-sama," a god associated with fisheries and wealth, and believed that the whales would drive sardines towards the coast so that they could be caught by fishermen. Because of this, there was a cultural whaling taboo in the region, and only the taking of stranded whales was allowed, as it was believed that these whales had sacrificed their lives for the humans.

This regional non-whaling culture was challenged at the beginning of the twentieth century when whaling companies from western Japan appeared in Hachinohe. Despite the massive protests of the local fishing population, an industrial whaling station was built a few kilometers east of Hachinohe in Same-ura in 1911. The station was situated at Ebisu Beach, where, according to a popular folktale from the Edo period, a benevolent whale god, who had protected the community, had died after being mortally wounded in western Japan by traditional whalers from Taiji. The whale's body turned into stone, and a small shrine was built in his honor. That a whaling station was now built at the very same place was seen as an affront by the locals. Moreover, it soon turned out that the whalers could not dispose of all the whaling waste products, and therefore large quantities of whale oil and blood flowed into the ocean, causing widespread environmental pollution. When not only sardines disappeared from the coast, but also seaweed and sea clams, over 1,100 fishermen marched on the whaling station to burn it down. The mob then turned to the village and attacked known supporters of the whaling company.

Whale Stone at the Nishinomiya Shrine near Ebisu Bay, Hachinohe. According to legend, the large stone in the background was once a whale god killed by western Japanese whalers. A statue of the god Ebisu is placed in front.

Photograph by Fynn Holm, 2018.

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During the subsequent court hearing, the whaling company publicly admitted that it had conducted whaling without an official license and caused environmental and economic distress to the locals without compensating them. The company reconciled with the fishing unions and hired locals to work at the rebuilt station, becoming the largest employer in the region until the station finally closed during the Great Depression in 1933. The Hachinohe region experienced a short revival of the local whaling culture when in the 1960s, over 220 inhabitants of the nearby town of Nangō worked for the Antarctic whaling fleet. Between 2017 and 2019, whales were once again flensed in Hachinohe as part of Japan's scientific whale research program (NEWREP-NP).

View over Ebisu Beach, where the first whaling station was built in 1911.

Photograph by Fynn Holm, 2018.

At the request of a private whaling company, the current city government plans to reuse the site that has so far been used for scientific whaling for the new commercial whaling enterprise. However, the memory of the 1911 anti-whaling protests is very much alive in Hachinohe, as several books about the protests and billboards at the site attest. During a press conference on 21 May 2019, the mayor referred to Nangō as proof of a local whaling culture, while also admitting that there had been a certain "incident" in the past. Furthermore, internal documents from the city's economic council show that the government is aware of the circumstances that led to the 1911 protests. Before giving their consent to the private whaling company, the city asked all fisheries-related organizations if they had any objections. Also, the city insisted that the whaling company would be solely responsible for the treatment of sewage containing blood and oil from whales, as well as neutralizing bad odors. In case of problems, the city would immediately contact the company to mitigate any damage.

As this document shows, the city has a strong interest in not repeating the same mistakes that were made one

hundred years ago. While the anti-whaling protests from 1911 are not part of the official discourse of the resumption of commercial whaling, their legacy is very much alive.

Arcadia Collection:
Coastal History

Further readings:

- Holm, Fynn. "After Withdrawal from the IWC: The Future of Japanese Whaling." *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 17, no. 4 (2019): 1–16.
- Itoh, Mayumi. *The Japanese Culture of Mourning Whales*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.
- Satō, Ryōichi. *Kujira kaisha yakiuchi jiken* [Setting afire the whale company]. Tokyo: Saimaru Shuppankai, 1987.
- Watanabe, Hiroyuki. *Japan's Whaling: The Politics of Culture in Historical Perspective*. Translated by Hugh Clarke. Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2009

Related links:

- Website of Hachinohe City (in Japanese)
  https://www.city.hachinohe.aomori.jp/index.html
- Japanese Fisheries Agency—Commercial whaling information
  https://www.jfa.maff.go.jp/e/whale/
- "Beauties and Beasts: Whales in Portugal, from Early-Modern Monsters to Today's Flagship Species." *Arcadia* 2018.
  http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/8449
- "Facing Changes, Changing Targets: Sperm Whale Hunting in Late Eighteenth-Century Brazil." *Arcadia* 2019.
  https://doi.org/10.5282/rcc/8798
- "New Histories of Pacific Whaling." *RCC Perspectives* 2019.
  http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/8954

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