AIDING AND ABETTING THE WHALING INDUSTRY

Clapham and colleagues ("Whaling as Science," BioScience 53: 210–212) remark that “Japan has also refused—contrary to common practice in other international management contexts—to allow independent analysis of its raw data,” and they report that obtaining anything more than unusable data summaries has been impossible.

This behavior, by scientists connected with either the government of Japan or its whaling industry—or, as is common, with both—is not limited to the matter of data from “scientific whaling,” nor is it confined to recent years. From 1960—when, as an international civil servant in the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, I first became involved with the International Whaling Commission—through to the 1980s, the Japanese authorities regularly provided the Scientific Committee of the commission with opaque, carefully contrived summaries of data on which they based demands for particular Antarctic whale catch quotas. These were the numbers of whales sighted by the “scout boats” attached to all their factory ships. Those boats were merely searching for whales prior to the catcher boats coming in to shoot the whales, and they were obviously concentrated in areas where the presence of whales was expected. The sightings per kilometer sailed were claimed to provide unbiased indices of the abundance of whales but in fact systematically concealed the rate at which the whales were declining in numbers. Even though other scientists did not accept such “estimates,” the presentation of those estimates was enough to suggest that there was great uncertainty about the declines, so there was no pressing reason to reduce quotas accordingly.

Attempts by some of us to break the code of the summaries in order to deduce the structure of the raw data were unsuccessful; evidently, great effort had been put into the summarization process. It would not be correct to attribute this practice to a cultural defect in Japanese science as such. All governments tend to be secretive, to various degrees, concerning access to data that they claim to be commercially or politically sensitive. Japan has, however, for a long time, been particularly prone to the practice and is, I think, unique in employing it deliberately to confound the work of international management bodies. The extreme form of this is the now well-documented aiding and abetting of the whaling industry in past submissions of falsified catch records to those bodies.

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Correction
Holt also writes that “readers might be surprised at seeing the word ‘anglers’ in the antepenultimate line of my letter on pp. 204–206 of the [March 2003] issue of BioScience. That conjures the entirely inappropriate image of old men sitting on a river bank trying to tempt carp to take hooked worms. The word should be ‘fishers.’”