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Japanese whalers get first catches as hunting resumes

KUSHIRO: Whalers brought ashore their first catches yesterday as they resumed commercial hunting after a three-decade hiatus, brushing aside criticism from activists who say the practice is cruel and outdated.

Five vessels set sail under grey morning skies from here with their horns blaring and grey tarps thrown over their harpoons. By yesterday afternoon, they were back with their catch: two grey minke whales.

The hunts come after Japan decided to withdraw from the International Whaling Commission, a move slammed by activists and anti-whaling countries but welcomed by Japanese whaling communities.

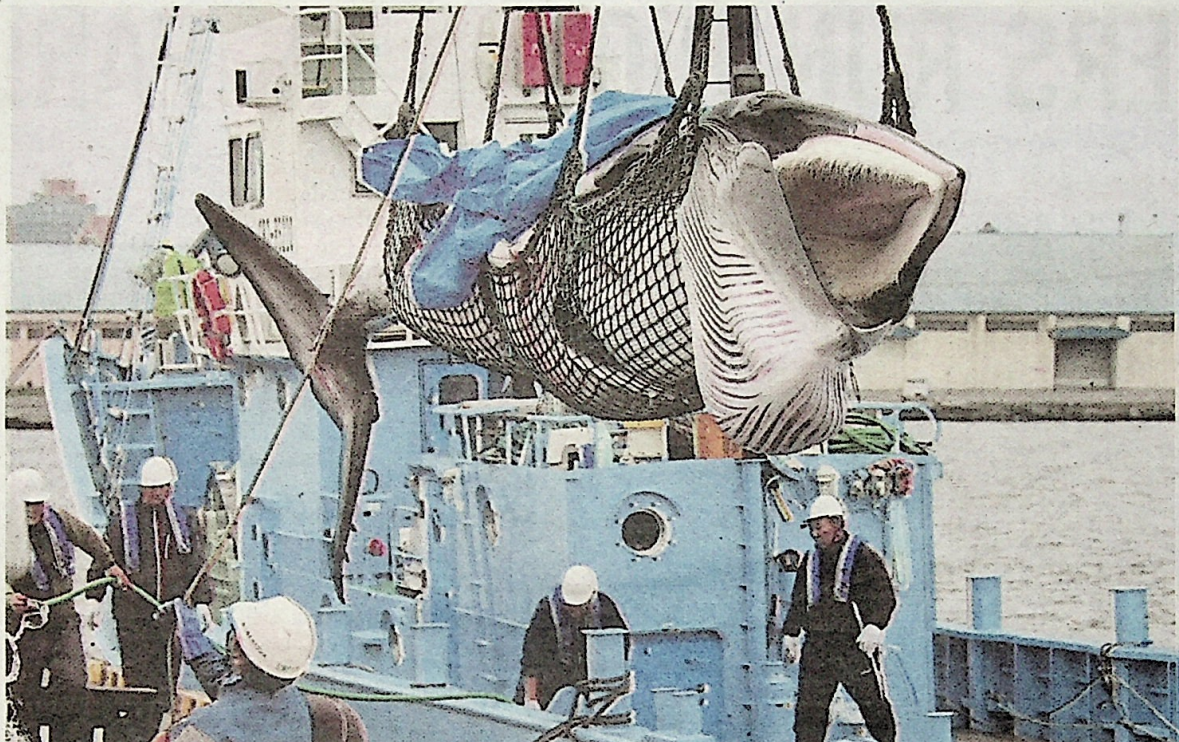
"Today is the best day," said Yoshifumi Kai, head of the Japan Small-Type Whaling Association, as the ocean giants were hauled ashore.

"It was worth waiting for 31 years," he said with a smile.

One of the whales, more than 8m long, was hoisted from a ship onto a truck and driven to a warehouse. Inside, whalers hosed it down with water and then lined up to pour ceremonial cups of the Japanese liquor sake over the animal — a ritual to purify and celebrate the catch.

Vessels left from other ports elsewhere in Japan yesterday, including in Shimonoseki in the west of the country, and whalers and government officials hailed the resumption of the hunts.

"I'm a bit nervous but happy



A minke whale being lifted off a boat after it is caught on the first day after the resumption of commercial whaling, in Kushiro, Hokkaido, yesterday. EPA PIC

that we can start whaling," Hideki Abe, 23, a whaler from the Miyagi region in northern Japan, said before leaving from here.

"I don't think young people know how to cook and eat whale meat any more. I want more people to try to taste it at least once."

"This is a small industry, but I am proud of hunting whales," added Kai in a ceremony before the boats left from here.

"People have hunted whales for more than 400 years in my home town."

Whaling has long proved a rare diplomatic flashpoint for Tokyo, which says the practice is a Japanese tradition that should not be subject to international interference.

As an IWC member, Japan was banned from commercial hunts of large whales, though it could catch small varieties in waters

near its coastline.

But it also exploited a loophole in the body's rules to carry out highly controversial hunts of whales in protected Antarctic waters under the banner of "scientific research".

Activists said the hunts had no scientific value, and Japan made no secret of the fact that meat from whales caught on those hunts ended up sold for consumption. **AFP**