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Marine biologist decries ‘whalemeat tasting’ scam.

March 2007, Nelson, NZ--New Zealand scientist and author C. George Muller says a recent hoax “whalemeat tasting” stall in Nelson was not only in poor taste, but also highly irresponsible.

The scam was not illegal since no actual whalemeat was involved, but Muller warns the publicity stunt by a local radio station plays right into the hands of Japanese whaling interests.

“While I doubt the radio station received any money from the whalers, they’re basically helping to spread their pro-whaling propaganda for them.”

Japanese whaling is carried out by several huge multinational fishing conglomerates, companies who already spend millions of dollars promoting whaling to consumers in Japan. Whalemeat from Japan’s programme ends up for sale in markets and expensive restaurants where it is worth in excess of US\$33 million per year, something Muller says is “quite clearly commercial whaling in all but name,” and therefore illegal under the 1986 Moratorium.

A marine biologist and author of *Echoes in the Blue*, a hard-hitting new book on whaling, Muller has previously described Japan’s whaling programme as “criminal”, since it defies numerous international laws and treaties banning whaling.

Possessing and selling whalemeat is not only an offence under the New Zealand Marine Mammal Act, but also under international law. The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) bans the trade and sale of endangered species.

Despite Japan flouting international law by selling whalemeat, Muller also describes the whaling controversy as “a battle for the hearts and minds of the public – one which isn’t helped by irresponsible clowns like Classic Hits trying to be funny.”

By presenting what people think is whalemeat in this manner they help de-stigmatise whaling and give it a certain legitimacy which it doesn’t deserve. People who see this booth in New Zealand offering “whalemeat” to taste might naturally assume it must therefore be both legally and morally acceptable to try it, since the stallholder wouldn’t be allowed to offer it if it was ‘wrong’.” Muller described the radio station’s stall a classic tool for dismantling social taboos, just like a wildfoods festival, as it was a venue where people are encouraged to eat something they normally wouldn’t dream of eating.

“Even if people only *think* they have eaten whalemeat the damage may be done. In their mind it has now become ok to eat whalemeat, and therefore to hunt them too, something the Japanese whaling industry is also very keen to promote – even going to the extent of putting whale on school lunch menus in an attempt to create a taste for it in the next generation of consumers.

Muller also points out that debate about eating whalemeat is frequently used as a smokescreen to divert attention away from the real issues surrounding whaling – such as whale population biology. “Japanese whaling interests commonly try to portray the whaling controversy as a cultural clash over whether it is acceptable to eat whalemeat or not – but that completely ignores the fact that many whale species are already endangered as a direct result of whaling, and all of the rorquals (Great Whales) they hunt are long-lived slow-growing mammals which simply aren’t capable of withstanding any sustained hunting pressure – as the results of past whaling demonstrate quite clearly.”

Southern hemisphere Blue whales were reduced to as few as 400 animals by past overhunting, but their numbers have not recovered despite over 40 years of full protection.

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