

## **The Failure of Japanese Whale Diplomacy: A Constructivist Analysis of Changes in International Norms**

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### ***Abstract***

This research examines the failure of Japanese whale diplomacy following the International Whaling Commission's (IWC) moratorium on commercial whaling in 1986, with a focus on Japan's attempts to change the conservationist view of whales to the one focused on consumption of whale meat. This article explains how Japanese whale diplomacy attempts to convince the international public that whaling is part of cultural preservation. The method used is a qualitative approach with analysis of official government documents and research related to Japanese diplomacy and whaling. The constructivism approach was used to analyze how international identities, norms, and discourses shape Japan's diplomatic policies.

The findings show that, despite Japan's efforts to prove that whaling is safe and sustainable, it has failed to change international norms on whale conservation. The dominant international discourse continues to regard whaling as unethical and environmentally damaging. Significant resistance from other countries that support conservation was a major obstacle.

This research reveals that the failure of Japanese diplomacy was not only due to international resistance, but also Japan's inability to align their scientific and cultural arguments with a global narrative that prioritizes environmental ethics. The contribution of this research lies in understanding the dynamics of norms and identities in international relations and the importance of ethical narratives in environmental diplomacy.

**Keywords:** Japanese whale diplomacy, conservation, constructivism, norms, whaling.

## Introduction

Whaling has long been a focal point in Japan's environmental diplomacy, drawing global attention to how a country can influence international norms and overcome external pressures while preserving its cultural traditions. Japan has become a country that has to negotiate with countries that oppose *whaling*, trying to lift the 1986 moratorium on commercial whaling set by the International Whaling Commission (IWC) in its 34<sup>th</sup> *Annual Meeting* on the 6<sup>th</sup> *Agenda*. This diplomacy has become a concern for many parties because it has become a tool for Japan to normalize this prohibited practice. From 1986 to 2018, Japan hunted about 20,497 whales under its scientific whaling program [IWC 2024], averaging 500–1000 whales per year. This data shows the continuity of Japan's whaling activities despite international bans and global criticism for various reasons that are also allowed by the IWC. This article seeks to explain why Japanese diplomacy has failed to alter key international norms established under the 1986 IWC moratorium on commercial whaling, despite Japan's sustained scientific and cultural justifications.

This study explores how Japan's diplomatic failure is shaped by complex dynamics, including domestic political pressure from the Japanese Whaling Triangle (bureaucrats, politicians, and industry groups), global environmental norms reinforced by anti-whaling coalitions (Australia, New Zealand), and the influence of international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as Greenpeace and Sea Shepherd. The 1986 moratorium marked a pivotal moment in global governance for marine life conservation, bringing Japan's whaling practices into the international spotlight [Holm 2019b]. Prior to the moratorium, Japanese whaling activities were largely viewed in the context of historical and cultural significance that has been deeply rooted in Japanese society for centuries [Butler-Stroud 2016]. Whaling not only

provides an important resource, but is also an integral part of Japan's cultural and social order [Barclay and Epstein 2013; Nomura 2020].

Japan's withdrawal from the IWC in 2018 highlighted its complex stance on whaling, shaped by cultural, economic, and international factors [Butler-Stroud 2016; Holm 2019b; Kojima 2019; Nomura 2020; Wakamatsu et al. 2018]. Increased global pressure in favor of environmental conservation and animal rights, fueled by the rise of environmental NGOs and a growing scientific consensus on the impact of whaling on marine biodiversity, has increased international criticism of Japan's whaling policies. In response to the moratorium and subsequent global criticism, Japan navigated a complex diplomatic landscape, balancing its domestic interests with its image and international relations at the same time. Post-moratorium, Japan's involvement in what it calls *scientific whaling* under the auspices of the IWC's provisions for scientific research, has been debated, seen by many as a way to circumvent a ban on commercial whaling [Coady, Gogarty, and McGee 2018]. The maneuver reflects Japan's nuanced strategy of environmental diplomacy, in which Japan seeks to maintain its cultural practices while engaging with an international regulatory framework. The Japanese government's arguments, centered on the principle of sustainable use of marine resources and the need for scientific data to effectively manage whale populations [MoFA 2024], highlight the delicate balance that Japan seeks to achieve between its national interests and global environmental norms.

This approach demonstrates Japan's efforts to maintain its cultural practices for reasons permitted by the IWC, despite facing international legal and diplomatic challenges. This article not only highlights Japan's diplomatic engagement tactics and strategies, but also its challenges in aligning domestic policy with global environmental standards. The Japanese diplomacy is inseparable from Japan's strongly integrated domestic politics. There is an internal political structure that influences whaling policy in Japan – the so-called *Japan Whaling Triangle*, consisting of bureaucratic institutions, political figures, and industry groups, who collectively push the pro-whaling agenda, ensuring strong

domestic support despite international criticism [Kagawa-Fox 2009]. This political attitude is also firmly embedded in Japanese society and has become a tradition that they consider worth preserving [Hein 2023].

Economically, whaling has a significant impact on local communities in Japan's fishing industry even though its contribution to national GDP is very small and it is classified as a minor industry in Japan today, with very little impact on the Japanese economy [Japan Times 2022]. The industry not only provides employment for thousands of people in the fisheries and processing sectors, but also contributes to the local economy in coastal communities that depend on marine resources. Whaling also plays an important role in national food security, with whale products being part of food consumption of economic value for the Japanese government, especially with subsidies for schools and hospitals in Japan [Barclay and Epstein 2013; Wakamatsu et al. 2018], but the trend of consuming whale meat in Japan has also decreased significantly [Fielding 2022].

Although its contribution to Japan's national GDP is very small, less than 0.1 percent, the industry still contributes about 10–20 percent to local GDP in areas that depend on whaling, such as Taiji and Shimonoseki [Hein 2023, p. 2; Holm 2019a; Nomura 2020]. In addition, the Japanese government has spent nearly \$400 million to support the industry through subsidies, suggesting that the whaling industry is not profitable without government support [McCurry 2021].

Japan's post-moratorium policy highlights negotiations in international environmental governance and the interplay between national actions and global norms. The interaction among the Japanese government, domestic interest groups, international NGOs, and the IWC showcases the complexities of environmental diplomacy. The author also explores how Japan's whaling policies have evolved in response to internal and external pressures [Strausz 2014], emphasizing the need to understand the balance between preserving cultural practices and adhering to global environmental norms, offering insights into the challenges of contemporary environmental diplomacy.

As such, this article provides a thorough examination of Japanese whale diplomacy that is directly related to the interaction between

cultural heritage, economic interests, and international environmental obligations. The central research question is: Why has Japan's diplomacy failed to alter the 1986 IWC moratorium despite claims of sustainable and culturally justified whaling? Japan has attempted to use a variety of diplomatic strategies, including scientific arguments that their whaling is sustainable and does not threaten whale populations, as well as cultural campaigns that emphasize the importance of whaling as part of Japan's cultural heritage. Nonetheless, international norms on whale conservation are strong and have been widely internalized by the global community, with whaling seen as unethical and environmentally destructive. The Japanese cultural identity, which views whaling as an integral part of their national tradition, is at odds with these international norms, creating significant resistance. In addition, domestic political dynamics, such as the political structure that favors the whaling industry, also contribute to Japan's failure to change the international outlook. By analyzing these factors through the lens of constructivist theory, this study seeks to explain why Japanese diplomacy has not succeeded in changing international norms regarding whaling.

## **Methodology**

This study applies the constructivist theory developed by Wendt [Wendt 1999], which argues that international norms are socially constructed through interactions among state and non-state actors. According to constructivist theory, norms such as whale conservation emerge from social processes and collective identities within international forums like the IWC. Japan's diplomatic strategy, which seeks to reframe whaling as a cultural and scientific activity, reflects an effort to challenge and reshape these deeply ingrained conservation norms.

Methodologically, this study employs a qualitative approach based on document analysis and discourse analysis. Primary sources include official reports from the International Whaling Commission (IWC), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, and international agreements such

as the 1986 IWC moratorium and UNCLOS. Secondary sources include peer-reviewed academic publications and reports from environmental NGOs such as Greenpeace and Sea Shepherd. The study covers the period from 1986 (the introduction of the IWC moratorium) to 2024, allowing for a comprehensive evaluation of Japan's evolving diplomatic strategy. This study does not include direct interviews with policymakers, focusing instead on analyzing policy documents and international reactions.

## **Literature Review**

This section reviews the existing literature on whaling diplomacy, marine environmental law, and norm diffusion theory to provide a comprehensive background for analyzing Japan's diplomatic strategy in the context of whale conservation. However, while existing literature extensively covers the international diplomacy of whaling, the legal frameworks surrounding marine conservation, and the political dynamics of whaling diplomacy [Fitzmaurice 2015; Dorsey and Cronon 2014], there remains a gap in understanding why Japan's diplomacy has failed to reshape international norms regarding whaling. Most studies focus on the broader legal and political context, but none specifically examines Japan's failed efforts to shift the global perspective on whaling through diplomatic channels and the internal cultural and political dynamics that hindered this change. Unlike previous studies, this research focuses on Japan's diplomatic strategies to maintain whaling practices, especially through the lens of cultural identity and the scientific justification offered by Japan to circumvent the IWC moratorium.

The study aims to understand why Japan's attempt to align its national values with global conservation norms has not been successful in reshaping international policy on whaling. This research draws on constructivist theory to explore how Japan's national identity, which views whaling as an integral part of its culture, clashes with global conservation norms that have become deeply entrenched. Through this lens, the study evaluates Japan's diplomatic efforts to localize international norms to

align with domestic practices, while also assessing the social and political factors that contributed to Japan's resistance to the internalization of these norms. This section reviews the existing literature on whaling diplomacy, marine environmental law, and norm diffusion theory to provide a comprehensive background for analyzing Japan's diplomatic strategy in the context of whale conservation.

### **Whaling Diplomacy and International Environmental Politics**

Research on whaling diplomacy has highlighted the contentious nature of Japan's position within the International Whaling Commission (IWC) and the broader international community. Fitzmaurice [Fitzmaurice 2015] provides an in-depth analysis of the legal and political conflicts surrounding commercial whaling, particularly Japan's strategic use of scientific justification to circumvent the 1986 IWC moratorium. Dorsey and Cronon [Dorsey and Cronon 2014] similarly trace the evolution of global whaling diplomacy, highlighting the shifting alliances between pro-whaling (e.g., Japan, Iceland, Norway) and anti-whaling (e.g., Australia, New Zealand, USA) coalitions within the IWC framework. Sellheim and Morishita [Sellheim and Morishita 2023] examine Japan's withdrawal from the IWC in 2018 as a strategic response to the IWC's institutional resistance to commercial whaling. Shutava [Shutava 2023] expands on this by analyzing domestic factors influencing Japan's decision, including the economic and cultural significance of whaling in certain coastal communities.

### **Marine Environmental Law and Trade Regulations**

Japan's diplomatic challenge is rooted in the broader legal framework of international environmental governance. Rayfuse, Jaeckel, and Klein [Rayfuse, Jaeckel, and Klein 2023] provide a comprehensive overview

of marine environmental law, including the role of UNCLOS and CITES in regulating whale hunting and trade. The 1946 International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling (ICRW) serves as the foundational legal framework for whaling regulation, but the addition of CITES (1973) and UNCLOS (1982) introduced more stringent environmental protection measures, effectively reinforcing the IWC moratorium. Harris [Harris 2022] explores the interaction between global environmental norms and trade regulations, emphasizing the conflict between sovereign rights over marine resources and collective conservation goals. Scholtz [Scholtz 2019] expands on this by discussing the ethical dimension of animal welfare in international law, underscoring the moral opposition to whaling among many Western nations.

### **Norm Diffusion and Political Dynamics**

Finnemore and Sikkink [Finnemore and Sikkink 1998] introduced the “norm life cycle” model to explain how international norms emerge, spread, and become institutionalized. According to this model, whale conservation norms have reached the “cascade” and “internalization” stages, where they are widely accepted and embedded in state behavior. Japan’s diplomatic resistance reflects a clash between the internalization of whale conservation norms by the global community and Japan’s efforts to redefine them through cultural and scientific arguments. Acharya [Acharya 2004] further develops the concept of “norm localization,” where states adapt global norms to align with domestic values. Japan’s attempt to frame whaling as a sustainable cultural practice aligns with Acharya’s model of localized norm adaptation. However, Japan’s strategy has faced resistance due to the deeply embedded moral opposition to whaling among leading anti-whaling states and environmental NGOs such as Greenpeace and Sea Shepherd [Milstein, McGaurr, and Lester 2021]. Mascia and Mills [Mascia and Mills 2018] explain that conservation norms spread not only through formal international agreements but also through advocacy and pressure from non-state actors. This dynamic

explains the growing influence of NGOs and pro-conservation coalitions in reinforcing whale conservation norms despite Japan's diplomatic efforts to shift them.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This research applies the constructivist theory developed by Alexander Wendt [Wendt 1999], which argues that international norms and social structures are shaped through interactions between state and non-state actors. According to Wendt, international anarchy is not an objective condition but a social construct that reflects the collective identities and shared norms of the international community. Norms, therefore, emerge through repeated social interactions and become institutionalized over time through processes of acceptance, rejection, and adaptation [Wendt 1999]. In the context of whaling diplomacy, Japan's attempt to alter global conservation norms reflects a struggle between domestic identity and established international standards. The 1986 International Whaling Commission (IWC) moratorium on commercial whaling represents a widely accepted global norm based on the principle of species conservation and animal welfare. Japan, however, frames whaling as part of its cultural heritage and seeks to redefine this norm through diplomatic strategies within the IWC and other international forums.

The process of norm formation and diffusion can be explained using the "norm life cycle" proposed by Finnemore and Sikkink [Finnemore and Sikkink 1998]. In this framework, norms go through three stages: (1) emergence – where norms are introduced and advocated by norm entrepreneurs, (2) cascade – where norms are widely accepted and institutionalized by international organizations and states, and (3) internalization – where norms become deeply embedded in state behavior [Finnemore and Sikkink 1998]. Japan's resistance reflects a clash between the norm cascade phase (where whale conservation norms have been institutionalized) and the process of internalization, which Japan resists due to domestic political and cultural factors.

Acharya's [Acharya 2004] concept of "norm localization" is also relevant in understanding Japan's strategy. Norm localization refers to how states adapt global norms to fit local values and traditions [Acharya 2004]. Japan's framing of whaling as a scientific and cultural practice reflects an attempt to align the global anti-whaling norm with domestic pro-whaling identity. However, this strategy has failed because whale conservation has become a moral issue that is deeply embedded in global environmental discourse, reinforced by the efforts of conservation groups such as Greenpeace and Sea Shepherd.

Mascia and Mills [Mascia and Mills 2018] highlight how innovative conservation policies spread through different channels, including state-to-state interaction and advocacy by non-state actors [Mascia and Mills 2018]. Japan's failure to shift the international norm reflects the strength of the existing conservation regime and the opposition from key anti-whaling states (e.g., Australia, New Zealand) and international NGOs. Winston [Winston 2018] also emphasizes that the success or failure of norm change depends on how well new norms align with existing social identities. Japan's national identity, which frames whaling as a traditional and sustainable practice, conflicts with the prevailing international norm that sees whaling as unethical and environmentally destructive.

Thus, Japan's failure to shift global whaling norms reflects a deeper tension between domestic identity and international expectations. Constructivism explains how Japan's attempt to redefine the norm faces resistance due to the entrenchment of whale conservation norms at both institutional and societal levels within the international community.

## **Result**

Before looking at the details of Japan's diplomatic strategy divided into several periods, it is important to understand the historical and political context that drove the change as Japan's long-standing whaling tradition was being challenged by growing global conservation pressures.

As a result, Japan has adapted its diplomatic strategy to defend its cultural practice while navigating evolving international norms. The following is a table summarizing the periodization of Japan's diplomatic strategy in whaling:

<b>Period</b>	<b>Key Trends and Strategies</b>
Pre-Moratorium (before 1986)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. Engage in commercial whaling openly and extensively</li><li>b. Defensive strategies to defend whaling rights</li></ul>
Moratorium (1986–2000)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. Turning to scientific whaling (scientific justification for whaling)</li><li>b. Forming coalitions with countries supporting whaling (Iceland and Norway)</li><li>c. Bilateral diplomacy to seek support</li></ul>
Adaptation and Resistance (2000–2018)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. Boosting public campaigns and cultural diplomacy</li><li>b. Seeking more countries to support their position at IWC</li></ul>
Withdrawal and Return to Commercial Hunting (2018 – present)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. Announced its withdrawal from IWC in December 2018, effective from July 2019</li><li>b. Continuing commercial whaling in its territorial waters</li><li>c. Focus on domestic consumption and whale diplomacy in a cultural context</li></ul>

Japan's diplomatic strategy regarding whaling has evolved in response to international pressure and shifting global norms. In the pre-moratorium period, Japan's defensive strategy aimed to preserve the status quo despite growing global criticism. After the imposition of the moratorium, Japan sought to justify whaling scientifically, albeit on a reduced scale. During the subsequent period of adjustment and opposition, Japan intensified public campaigns and cultural diplomacy to garner international support and reshape global perceptions of whaling.

However, resistance from the international community highlighted the strong establishment of conservation norms, making it difficult for Japan to relax the moratorium. Japan's withdrawal from the IWC in 2018 and its return to commercial whaling marked a pivotal shift in diplomatic tactics. By focusing more on domestic consumption and cultural diplomacy, Japan seemed to view its participation in the IWC as ineffective in achieving its goals. This analysis reveals that Japan's whaling strategy has adapted over time to global pressures, with ongoing challenges as it strives to balance cultural identity with conservation concerns.

### **Japan's Failure to Change International Norms**

Japan has been working hard to change international norms on whale conservation to be more supportive of whaling but faces significant resistance from the international community. Japan's domestic policies complicate this process, as the government continuously emphasizes whaling as part of its cultural heritage. The Small-Type Coastal Whaling (STCW) and Aboriginal Subsistence Whaling (ASW) policies have been used to justify the continuation of whaling practices. These domestically driven policies highlight the tension between cultural sovereignty and international conservation norms [Holm 2019b; Kagawa-Fox 2009; Nomura 2020]. Member countries of the International Whaling Commission (IWC) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that support whale conservation continue to oppose Japan's efforts [Berkowitz and Grothe-Hammer 2022; Holm 2019b; Stoett 2011]. This resistance stems from the view that whaling is an unethical and environmentally damaging practice [Cunningham, Huijbens, and Wearing 2012; Nomura 2020; Papastavrou and Ryan 2023]. Countries such as Australia and New Zealand [Coady, Gogarty, and McGee 2018; Scott 2014; Scott et al. 2019], along with NGOs such as Greenpeace and Sea Shepherd,

have been active in campaigns against whaling [Greenpeace 2024; Sea Shepherd 2024], advocating for whale protection around the world. This campaign created great political and diplomatic pressure on Japan, making their efforts to change conservation norms very difficult.

Whale conservation norms have become deeply ingrained in international policy and the global community, making them difficult to change. These agreements have contributed to the growing international consensus that whaling is not only unsustainable but also unethical, especially as whale populations continue to recover from past over-exploitation [Mascia and Mills 2018]. The International Whaling Commission (IWC) moratorium on commercial whaling, established in 1986, is a key international agreement that has been central to the global conservation effort to protect whale populations. Japan's resistance to this moratorium, notably through its use of scientific whaling, highlights the tension between sovereign rights and international environmental norms.

The IWC's decision to impose the moratorium reflects a growing global consensus on the need to protect whale populations from commercial exploitation [Berkowitz and Grothe-Hammer 2022]. In addition to the IWC, CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) and UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea) have been crucial in regulating the international trade and protection of whales. These agreements serve as complementary frameworks to the IWC, with CITES regulating the trade in whale products, and UNCLOS providing a framework for the conservation of marine biodiversity, including cetaceans [Gray and Kennelly 2018; Sellheim and Morishita 2023b]. This norm is supported by eight international agreements created within the 1986–2024 period. Here is a table summarizing the international agreements on the conservation of endangered species and the protection of the marine environment that specifically addresses whales during the 1946/1986–2024 time range:

No	International Agreement	Year	Japan's Status	Description & References
1	International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling (ICRW) & IWC Moratorium	1946 / 1986	Former Party (Withdrew in 2019)	Established the International Whaling Commission (IWC), which imposed a moratorium on commercial whaling in 1986. Japan withdrew in 2019, resuming commercial whaling in its territorial waters [Fitzmaurice 2015; Sellheim and Morishita 2023]
2	Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES)	1973	Party	Regulates international trade in endangered species, including several whale species under Appendix I (prohibited trade) and Appendix II (controlled trade). Japan has repeatedly challenged restrictions on whale meat trade [Danaher 2002; Wold 2020].
3	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)	1982 (effective 1994)	Party	Article 65 allows for state regulation of marine mammal exploitation but also mandates international cooperation for their conservation. Japan's interpretation often conflicts with conservation-focused interpretations by other nations [Caddell 2023; Kolmaš 2020b].
4	Antarctic Treaty System (ATS) & Madrid Protocol	1991	Party	Prohibits commercial exploitation in the Antarctic, but Japan justified its whaling operations under the scientific research exemption (Article VIII of ICRW), leading to international disputes [Maruf and Chang 2023].

No	International Agreement	Year	Japan's Status	Description & References
5	Memorandum of Understanding for the Conservation of Cetaceans in the Pacific Islands Region (Pacific Cetaceans MoU)	2006	Observer	Promotes whale conservation among Pacific island nations. Japan supports scientific cooperation but resists calls to ban all whaling [Maruf and Chang 2023].
6	Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS)	1979	Not a Party	Establishes conservation measures for migratory species, including cetaceans. While Japan is not a signatory, it recognizes CMS's influence on global conservation policies [Caddell 2014, 2023].
7	Agreement on the Conservation of Cetaceans in the Black Sea, Mediterranean Sea, and Contiguous Atlantic Area (ACCOBAMS)	1996	Not a Party	This regional agreement focuses on cetacean conservation in European waters, but indirectly influences international whale protection norms [Panigada et al. 2024].
8	International Maritime Organization (IMO) – Guidelines for Ships Operating in Arctic Ice-Covered Waters	2010	Participant	While Japan does not conduct Arctic whaling, it adheres to IMO guidelines for marine biodiversity protection [Suisted and Neale 2004].

Japan, as a member of CITES and UNCLOS, has faced increasing international pressure to adhere to global norms on whale conservation. The diplomatic landscape surrounding whaling is far more complex than a binary conflict between Japan and the rest of the world. While Japan has faced opposition from anti-whaling countries such as Australia, New Zealand, and the United States, it has also built alliances with pro-whaling states including Norway, Iceland, and Russia. These countries advocate for sustainable use of marine resources and have resisted the blanket prohibition of commercial whaling imposed by the IWC. Additionally, Japan has garnered support from developing nations through diplomatic and economic incentives, ensuring a more nuanced global debate on whaling policy [Dorsey 2014; Sellheim and Morishita 2023]. However, Japan's withdrawal from the IWC in 2018 and its continued practice of whaling within its territorial waters demonstrates a direct challenge to these international agreements. Despite being a party to these agreements, Japan has found ways to navigate the system in order to continue its whaling activities.

These agreements address the importance of conservation of endangered species and the protection of the marine environment [Gray and Kennelly 2018]. The IWC, as the main regulatory body in this regard, has adopted a moratorium on commercial whaling since 1986, reflecting the global consensus on the need to protect whales from exploitation. In addition, this norm is also driven by increased public awareness of animal rights and environmental protection, which makes whaling increasingly unacceptable in the eyes of many international communities [Hein 2023]. An analysis of data on changes in ratification and support for whaling since the 1986 moratorium shows a clear trend. Since the imposition of the moratorium, the number of countries supporting whaling in the IWC has tended to decline [Deitelhoff and Zimmermann 2018; Simmonds et al. 2021]. Although Japan managed to gain support from several developing countries through economic diplomacy, this amount was not enough to reverse the moratorium [Matsuoka 2018]. Many countries that previously supported whaling have changed their

positions due to domestic and international pressures, as well as changes in their national environmental policies [Betsill 2007; Holm 2019a; Holt 1999]. This shows that, despite Japan's use of various diplomatic strategies, it has not succeeded in overcoming the strong and widespread conservation norms that have been established in the international community.

### **International Whaling Governance Beyond the IWC**

While the International Whaling Commission (IWC) is the primary regulatory body for global whaling policies, several other international organizations play crucial roles in shaping whale conservation and resource management. Japan has actively engaged with these organizations, utilizing them as alternative platforms to justify its whaling policies. The North Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission (NAMMCO), established in 1992, serves as a pro-whaling regional body that supports sustainable whaling practices. Unlike the IWC, which focuses on conservation, NAMMCO promotes the management of marine mammals as a natural resource [NAMMCO 2023]. Japan has maintained informal cooperation with NAMMCO member states, particularly Norway and Iceland, to strengthen its pro-whaling stance in global negotiations [Wold 2020].

Additionally, CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) have become alternative forums for Japan's whaling advocacy. Within CITES, Japan has persistently challenged restrictions on whale meat trade, arguing that such trade should be permitted under sustainable management practices. Meanwhile, through FAO, Japan has sought to emphasize the economic and cultural dimensions of whaling, framing the practice as an issue of food security rather than conservation [Sakaguchi et al. 2021; Wold 2020].

## **The Role of Japanese Cultural Identity**

Japanese cultural identity plays a significant role in maintaining their whaling policy, with whaling being deeply embedded in their culture and tradition [Imawan, Wirasenjaya, and Zhafran 2021, p. 4]. Historically, whaling has not only provided a source of food but also has strong cultural and spiritual meaning for certain coastal communities in Japan, extending back hundreds of years [Holm 2019b; Kato 2007; Kolmaš 2020a]. In many coastal communities, whaling is not just a food source, but also a deeply respected cultural practice passed down through generations, supporting local economies and even contributing to regional tourism [Harrell 2020; Kato 2007; Rots and Haugan 2023]. This practice reflects Japan's cultural sovereignty and national identity, which emphasizes the importance of respecting local traditions and independence in determining their own environmental policies [Nomura 2020].

The Japanese government often uses this argument in international diplomacy to defend whaling, asserting that this practice is part of the cultural heritage that the global community must respect [York 2017]. Japan has continually framed its Small-Type Coastal Whaling (STCW) as an essential cultural practice, similar to Aboriginal Subsistence Whaling (ASW) recognized by IWC regulations. Japan formally applied for an ASW exemption in 1986, arguing that STCW served similar purposes to subsistence whaling practiced by Indigenous communities in Alaska, Chukotka, and Greenland [Sellheim 2018]. Japan continues to push for the recognition of STCW as a matter of cultural preservation and food security, emphasizing its importance for local coastal communities [Holm 2019b]. In 1986, Japan applied for Aboriginal Subsistence Whaling (ASW). Japan argued that their Small-Type Coastal Whaling (STCW) was similar to aboriginal subsistence whaling that was exempt from the moratorium [Sellheim 2018], but their proposal was rejected because it did not meet the subsistence standards of the IWC [Holm 2019a].

Japan's stance on whaling, deeply tied to its cultural identity, often clashes with the evolving international conservation norms. Despite the 1986 IWC moratorium and Japan's repeated attempts to secure ASW exemptions, international opposition against whaling remains strong, further shaping global norms about sustainable whaling practices [Dippel 2015]. While some Indigenous communities have been granted subsistence whaling rights, Japan continues to argue that coastal whaling should be considered similarly under IWC regulations, though it has not succeeded in changing this norm [Dippel 2015; MoFA 2024]. Many countries and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) argue that whaling is unethical and damaging to global whale populations. These norms are supported by international agreements [Holm 2019b], media framing [Xu#, Liu, and Leslie 2022], and paradigm shifts in IWC [Dippel 2015]. The ongoing clash between Japan's cultural identity and global conservation norms presents a significant challenge for its diplomacy.

Despite Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs emphasizing the sustainability of its whaling practices, arguing they are based on scientific research and cultural necessity [MoFA 2024], Japan faces persistent resistance from both environmental NGOs and pro-conservation countries globally. This debate demonstrates the complexity of balancing cultural sovereignty with international obligations for environmental conservation, as well as how national identity can influence foreign policy in an increasingly integrated global context.

## **Discussion**

### **Failure of Japanese Diplomacy**

Japan's whaling policy has been used as a tool to negotiate its position and influence in international environmental politics, with the goal of shaping global environmental norms and policies in its favor. However, Japan's failure to effectively alter these norms exposes the limitations of this strategy. It often finds itself at odds with countries

that prioritize stricter conservation efforts, hindering its ability to lead in global environmental politics. This study uses a constructivist theory approach to analyze Japan's diplomatic failure. Constructivism focuses on the role of ideas, norms, and identities in international relations, as outlined by Alexander Wendt, who argues that social reality is shaped by the interactions and collective perceptions of international actors [Wendt 1999]. In Japan's case, strong global conservation norms, driven by heightened environmental awareness and anti-whaling campaigns, have been widely internalized. Japan's attempt to shift the focus from conservation to consumption clashes with these deeply ingrained international norms, which prioritize environmental protection and animal rights.

Constructivism explains that the failure of Japanese diplomacy is largely due to their inability to change the international community's perceptions and beliefs about whaling. Although Japan has used a variety of diplomatic strategies, including scientific and ethical arguments and cultural campaigns, they have failed to overcome strong resistance because whale conservation norms have become an integral part of global identity. Constructivism suggests that changing norms takes a lot of time and effort, often involving a fundamental change in the perspectives and beliefs of international actors. In addition, constructivism also highlights the importance of identity in Japanese diplomacy. Japan sees whaling as part of their cultural identity and sovereignty, which has led them to continue trying to maintain this practice despite facing international pressure. However, this Japanese cultural identity clashes with the collective identity of the international community, which increasingly prioritizes environmental protection and animal welfare. This clash of identities creates a diplomatic dilemma for Japan, where it must strike a balance between maintaining their cultural traditions and meeting international norms.

Thus, the theory of constructivism helps explain that Japanese diplomacy's failure to change international norms about whaling is the result of the complexity of the interaction between norms, identities, and collective perceptions at the global level. Japan's efforts

to promote whaling as a legitimate and sustainable practice continue to face major obstacles as whaling conservation norms have become an integral part of the current international order. This analysis shows that environmental diplomacy requires a more cooperative and sensitive approach to changing norms and identities that exist in the international community.

### **The Impact of Japan's Diplomacy Failure**

Japan's failure in changing international norms on whaling has significant and complex implications for its foreign policy and international reputation. Despite using diplomatic strategies such as scientific data, cultural campaigns, and economic diplomacy, Japan has failed to shift the global perspective in favor of whaling. This highlights Japan's limited influence over international normative structures, which prioritize environmental protection. The immediate consequence has been a shift in Japan's foreign policy from attempting to change these norms to focusing on defending its whaling practices. Japan's withdrawal from the International Whaling Commission (IWC) in 2018 and its return to commercial whaling in 2019 [Holm 2019a; Kojima 2019] reflect its frustration with international pressure. This move underscores a policy shift that increasingly prioritizes cultural sovereignty and the right to set national policy without international interference.

Further implications can be seen in Japan's international reputation. The failure to reach a consensus or change international norms regarding whaling has reinforced the negative view of Japan in the eyes of many countries and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that support conservation. Japan is often perceived as a country that opposes global efforts to protect endangered species, which has impacted their diplomatic relations with pro-conservation countries such as Australia and New Zealand [Coady, Gogarty, and McGee 2018; IWC 2011; Strand and Tuman 2012]. This negative

perception also affects Japan's global image as a country that supports sustainable development and environmental protection. Japan's Foreign Ministry, worried about the possible loss of international reputation, was reluctant enough to withdraw from the organization. However, the LDP Whaling Caucus (LDP-WC), with the strong leadership of Toshihiro Nikai, Secretary General of the LDP, managed to gain the support of Prime Minister Abe [Matsuoka 2018]. Thus, the withdrawal was made possible with the support of the prime minister and his office. However, this has a major impact on Japan's diplomatic reputation as a country that has a good bargaining position [Sakaguchi et al. 2021].

In addition, the failure of Japanese whale diplomacy also has domestic implications. Domestically, the Japanese government has to deal with divided public opinion regarding whaling [Tsubuku and Brasor 2019]. While some coastal communities support whaling as part of cultural traditions, many Japanese citizens, especially the younger generation and environmental advocates, are increasingly opposed to this practice [Wakamatsu, Nakamura, and Managi 2022]. This creates a political dilemma for the Japanese government in balancing domestic interests with international pressure. Overall, the failure of Japanese whale diplomacy shows the complexity of changing entrenched international norms. It highlights the challenges in navigating international political dynamics that are increasingly influenced by the values of conservation and environmental protection. In this context, Japan needs to reevaluate its diplomatic approach and seek a more cooperative and consensus-based strategy to address sensitive global environmental issues. The diplomatic complexity of whaling policies extends beyond Japan's conflict with anti-whaling nations. Japan's ability to maintain alliances with countries that support whaling, such as Norway and Iceland, highlights a multi-faceted global debate rather than a binary opposition. Furthermore, the presence of alternative regulatory bodies, such as NAMMCO and CITES, demonstrates that Japan has pursued a diverse diplomatic strategy to sustain its whaling policies despite international resistance [Mauad and Betsill

2019]. Recognizing these multi-layered governance structures is essential for understanding Japan's continued engagement in whaling diplomacy.

## **Conclusion**

This study has explored the complexities surrounding Japanese whale diplomacy, focusing on the intersection of its cultural identity and evolving international norms. Japan's continued efforts to preserve its whaling practices have been met with significant resistance from global conservation entities and states advocating environmental protection. By employing constructivist theory, the research highlights the interplay between domestic cultural values and international environmental norms, illustrating how Japan's national identity, particularly in relation to whaling, impacts its foreign policy strategies.

The study has shown that, while Japan views whaling as an integral part of its cultural heritage, this stance often conflicts with international consensus on conservation. Japan's diplomatic efforts to frame Small-Type Coastal Whaling (STCW) as subsistence whaling face strong opposition from global conservation frameworks. However, Japan's cultural stance on whaling frequently clashes with the evolving international norms of whale conservation.

Furthermore, the analysis underscores the significance of international legal agreements, such as the IWC moratorium, CITES, and UNCLOS, in shaping global norms and highlighting Japan's challenges in aligning with these frameworks. The study also expands on the broader dynamics of international whaling, acknowledging the role of pro-whaling nations and the shifting alliances within forums like NAMMCO, which add layers of complexity to Japan's diplomatic efforts.

In conclusion, Japan's diplomatic failure to alter international norms on whaling stems not only from international pressure but also from the challenges of reconciling deeply embedded cultural practices with the global shift towards environmental protection. This conflict between

Japan's cultural sovereignty and international conservation efforts remains a central issue in understanding the dynamics of contemporary international environmental diplomacy.

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