

SAVE JAPAN DOLPHINS COALITION

ANIMAL WELFARE INSTITUTE + EARTH ISLAND INSTITUTE + ELSA NATURE CONSERVANCY OF JAPAN + IN DEFENSE OF ANIMALS



Mercury in Dolphin Meat: The New Minamata Plague in Japan

A Summary of the Evidence

Dolphins and whales living in the oceans are top level predators of fish and other organisms. In polluted nearshore environments, and even on the high seas, concentration of pollutants, notably mercury, PCB's, and heavy metals, are likely. Mercury is a potent neuro-toxin, and scientists have found that even low concentrations can cause damage to nervous systems. Developing fetuses and children are especially at risk. Time and time again, samples of dolphin and whale meat destined for human consumption in Japan markets have been demonstrated to carry heavy loads of dangerous poisons and toxins -- a Minamata disease vector still completely ignored by the Japanese government, to the detriment of Japanese citizens. Dolphin meat mercury levels are deemed higher than the mercury levels in fish that caused the Minamata disaster in Japan in the 1950's.

2006: On December 26, 2006, the director of food products for the Okuwa Supermarket Corporation, Mr. Yasunari Kanki, banned the sale of all dolphin meat in all of their stores. The ban is now permanent. The supermarket chain and conglomerate is comprised of drug stores, movie theatres, home store centers, sports clubs, hotels and amusement facilities.

2006: On December 22, 2006, *The Japan Times* tested a random sample of dolphin meat (iruka niku) sold at the Shingu Central Okuwa Supermarket for total mercury with a readout of 5.40 ppm -- 13.5 times higher than the maximum advisory level of 0.4ppm, set by the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry of Japan.

2006: The Elsa Nature Conservancy of Japan, a member of the Save Japan Dolphins Coalition, bought two packages of short-finned pilot whale (gondou) meat at a supermarket run by the Taiji Fishery Cooperative on November 7, 2006. One package of the whale meat showed as much as 3.82ppm of mercury, which is 9.55 times higher than the maximum advisory level of 0.4ppm, set by the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry of Japan. The other package of pilot whale meat showed 1.31ppm, which is 3.275 times higher than the maximum advisory level. The tests were done by the local governmental Inspection Center of Public Health in Ibaraki Prefecture.

2004: A scientific study revealed the harmful effects of exposure to mercury on brain development in children due to consumption of whale meat and some fish. This renews concerns that the Japanese Government continues to sell whale, dolphin and porpoise meat which, the

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Environmental Investigation Agency has shown, contains levels of mercury in excess of their own health guidelines. The study, carried out in the Danish Faroe Islands over a 14-year period, suggested that post-natal exposure to methylmercury can cause children to suffer developmental problems, and disruption is exacerbated by continued consumption of mercury-containing products. It also supported concerns that damage caused by pre-natal exposure to methylmercury may be irreversible. People living in the Faroe Islands are exposed to high levels of mercury and methylmercury through their seafood-rich diet, which includes pilot whale meat. ("Delayed brainstem auditory evoked potential latencies in 14-year-old children exposed to methylmercury" by Murata, K., Weihe, P., Budtz-Jørgensen, E., Jørgensen, P.J., Grandjean, P., The Journal of Pediatrics, February 2004. p177-183.)

2004: In February 2004, independent researchers working with the Environmental Investigation Agency purchased a range of products through the Internet from the Japanese company Ishinomaki Suisan and analysed them in Japan for contaminants. Three samples of canned whale stew contained an average of 1.10ppm mercury and 0.67ppm methylmercury, almost three times higher than levels allowed under Japan's food safety legislation.

2001 - 2003: Chemical analyses of 72 meat and blubber samples of small whales and dolphins purchased from Japanese supermarkets by the Environmental Investigation Agency revealed that government-permitted levels for mercury exceeded the Japanese Government's allowable levels in 60% of products. The average mercury level was 1.88ppm (parts per million), close to five times the maximum allowable level set by Japan. The average concentration of methylmercury was 1.11ppm, nearly four times the maximum allowable levels. DNA analyses commissioned by EIA and other groups have consistently shown that the fraudulent sale of dolphin and porpoise products labelled as whale is widespread in Japan. One sample of bottlenose dolphin meat sold as whale contained concentrations of mercury over 50 times higher than the permitted level. (Chemical analyses of the products were carried out at the Daiichi College of Pharmaceutical Sciences in Fukuoka.)

NOTE on MINAMATA DISEASE: Over many decades, mercury-contaminated waste from a Chisso Corporation plastics manufacturing plant on Kyushu Island, Japan systematically spilled into nearby Minamata Bay. Local residents became poisoned by the mercury which accumulated in seafood and shellfish in the Bay. Children were subsequently born with the disease, which attacks the nervous system producing uncontrollable movements, speech impairment and sometimes death. In the 1950's when Minamata disease was first identified and traced to the plant, over 100 victims had been identified. The sediment in the Bay remains contaminated and fishing is still prohibited there. An estimated 10,000 victims of Minamata disease still exist and at least 3,000 more have died from the disease.

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CONCLUSION: The Japanese government, in order to promote whaling and the continued slaughter of dolphins, is ignoring the scientific evidence that dolphin meat should not be eaten, due to the very real danger of more Minamata-like outbreaks of deaths, fetal damage, and severe, permanent neuro-toxin damage to babies. The slaughter of dolphins and whales for food in Japan is poisoning the people of Japan. The sale of mercury-contaminated dolphin and whale meat on the Japanese market must cease immediately. Until the Japanese government takes action, individual stores and markets must ban such sales immediately.