

# Japanese whalers return to port

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## **JAPAN'S whaling fleet has ended its annual Antarctic hunt after landing 30 per cent of its planned catch of more than 900 whales.**

Fisheries Minister Michihiko Kano yesterday blamed bad weather and "sabotage" by the Sea Shepherd environmental protest flotilla for the reduced catch.

Although the catch of 266 was almost 100 more whales than the whalers caught last year, the shortfall might add to the financial pressure on the so-called scientific whaling program.

The Australian government welcomed Japan's decision to recall its fleet from the Southern Ocean, saying it condemned all commercial whaling, "including Japan's so-called 'scientific' whaling program".

"Japan's whaling activities are contrary to international law," said Environment Minister Tony Burke, Attorney-General Nicola Roxon and acting Foreign Minister Craig Emerson in a statement.

"That is why Australia commenced and will continue legal action in the International Court of Justice. Our efforts are aimed at ending Southern Ocean whaling for good."

Mr Kano said the outcome of this year's hunt would be reviewed but did not directly respond to questions about the program's future. Many observers thought the program would be discontinued this season after last year's earthquake, but the whalers were given fresh funds to return to the Antarctic late last year and insiders say they believe the hunt will continue in the future.

Sea Shepherd founder Paul Watson used the cessation of this year's hunt to claim victory over the Japanese fleet. "If the Japanese whalers return, Sea Shepherd will return. We are committed to the defence of the Southern Ocean Whale Sanctuary," he said.

But a spokesman for the Institute of Cetacean Research, Glenn Inwood, said the strategies used by the whalers this year helped increase the overall catch and "prevented Sea Shepherd from endangering Japanese lives and damaging the Japanese vessels".

This summer saw the usual heated clashes between the fleet and the protest flotilla, with Sea Shepherd activists throwing rancid butter "bombs" at the fleet and trying to foul its props.

The whaling vessels used water cannons to repel the protesters and conducted their own prop-fouling efforts.

Australia was pitched into a political nightmare in January when the Sea Shepherd aided three activists from another group, Forest Rescue, in boarding a whaling vessel. Japan waived its right to charge them with trespass and handed the men back into Australian custody, from which they were released without charge.

Commercial whaling is banned under an international treaty but Japan has since 1987 used a loophole to carry out "lethal research". The country makes no secret of the fact that whale meat from this research ends up on dinner tables and in restaurants.