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Monday, May 14, 2007

Sushi Eaters = Whale Killers?

Dateline: Elizabeth, New Jersey

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Give a man a fish, and he'll eat sushi for a day. Teach a man to fish, and he'll end up getting in trouble with whale preservationists.

At least that's probably what the people at True World Foods are thinking. They're the Brooklyn-born, Elizabeth, N.J.-based company that dominates much of the sushi-supply market in the U.S. — and probably supplies your corner sushi restaurant with its fish. The company is the dominant fish supplier to sushi restaurants in 20 states.

So when True World recently announced that it had entered into a distribution partnership with the Japanese seafood trader Kyokuyo Co., Ltd., environmentalists quickly pointed out that one of Kyokuyo's products is whale meat, and urged True World to use its corporate leverage to convince its new partner to get out of that business. The situation has forced politically sensitive American sushi lovers to wonder if they can enjoy a luscious piece of tekka-maki without feeling like they've just pulled the trigger on Flipper in the process.

"Personally, I'm a sushi fanatic and a huge fan of Japanese culture," says Patrick Ramage, global whale program manager at the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), "but in this instance they [Kyokuyo] are persisting in clinging to what is really an outmoded 19th-century industry at odds not just with international opinion and norms but also with the views of the majority of their own people."

Apparently, the folks at True World Foods can hear the mournful whale song. Within 48 hours of the launch of the publicity campaign by IFAW, Humane Society International, and the Environmental Investigation Agency, the company issued a press release, stating that it personally has no dealings involving whale meat.

"We deeply respect the right of animal-rights organizations to express their views and to take constructive action in support of their beliefs," CEO Takeshi Yashiro says in the press release. "At the

same time, the public should know that True World Foods has never, does not and never will sell, deal in or purchase whale meat. We are in the process of reminding all of our suppliers that we advocate humane fishing practices and we urge them all to support such practices worldwide."

Kyokuyo, through its Seattle-based office, announced that the company would no longer be selling whale products as soon as its current inventories are used up. The decision, it said, was made well before the current controversy.

Requests for comment from Kyokuyo, True World, and some of True World's sushi clients went unfulfilled.

The IFAW's Ramage counts this as a win for whales regardless of how Kyokuyo spins it. "Not to strain the seafood puns, but there's something fishy about their statement, but we're encouraged by what looks like a rapid move to get out of the whaling business," he says. "It looks like the whales may have won here."

— Michael Y. Park

The online publicity campaign launched by the Environmental Investigation Agency, Humane Society International, and International Fund for Animal Welfare can be accessed at www.eia-global.org. True World Foods' Web site is www.trueworldfoods.com. < [return to today's Daily Dish](#)