



Japan has temporarily suspended its annual Antarctic whaling after repeated harassment by a conservationist group, a government official said Wednesday. Sea Shepherd Conservation Society ships have been chasing the Japanese whaling fleet for weeks in the icy seas off Antarctica, trying to block Japan's annual whale hunt, planned for up to 945 whales.

Japan has halted the hunt since Feb. 10 after persistent "violent" disruptions by the anti-whaling protesters, said fisheries agency official Tatsuya Nakaoku.

So far, the attacks have not caused any injuries or major damage to the vessels, he said, but the protesters are throwing rancid butter in bottles and once the protesters got a rope entangled in the propeller on a harpoon vessel, causing it to slow down.

"We have temporarily suspended our research whaling to ensure safety," he said. The fleet plans to resume hunting when conditions are deemed safe, he added, but declined to say how long the suspension is planned for.

The whale hunts, which Japan says are for scientific purposes, are allowed by the International Whaling Commission as an exception to the 1986 ban, but opponents say they are a cover for commercial whaling because whale meat not used for study is sold for consumption in Japan.

The Sea Shepherd group has been shadowing Japan's whaling fleet for several years, and its campaign has drawn high-profile donor support in the United States and elsewhere and spawned the popular Animal Planet series "Whale Wars."

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