

Taiji: Japan's Dolphin Cull and the Clash of Cultures

David McNeill

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By David McNeill

Dolphin and humpback whale are just two of the items on the menu in the fishing village of Taiji where the locals battle Hollywood environmentalists and ‘racist’ foreigners. David McNeill mingles with the suspicious locals and witnesses a clash of cultures. Below, too, see his interview with dolphin trainer turned activist Ric O’Barry.

In Taiji, the fishermen say that dolphin tastes like venison or beef. But eaten raw with a dab of ginger and soy sauce, the glistening dark flesh resembles liver with a coppery aftertaste that lingers on the roof of the mouth long after you’ve chewed it past your protesting taste buds. The ripe, tangy smell stays longer. “I hate cutting up dolphin,” says Motohata Toshihiro, who runs a nearby whale-meat shop. “The stink stays on you for days, even after several baths.”

this sleepy harbor town at the tip of the Kii peninsula south of Kyoto. Since October, perhaps 2,000 small whales and striped, bottlenose, spotted and risso’s dolphins have been slaughtered for meat that ends up on the tables of local homes and restaurants and in vacuum-packed bags in supermarkets. By the end of March, 1,000 more will go the same way, part of what is probably the largest annual cull of cetaceans – about 26,000 around coastal Japan according to environmentalists -- in the world.

Six hours from Tokyo and accessible only via a coastal road that snakes through tunnels hewn from dense, pine-carpeted mountains, Taiji for years escaped the prying eyes of animal rights activists, but the isolation has been abruptly ended by the Internet and the cheap rail pass. A steady trickle of foreign protestors – most Japanese people know little about the tradition -- now arrives in the rusting town square to cross swords with local bureaucrats and the 26 fishermen who run the hunt.



Entrance to Taiji



Long view of Taiji

Dolphin-hunting season has arrived again in

As Taiji’s notoriety has grown, fueled by

gruesome videos of the dolphin kill posted on YouTube and by celebrity criticism from Joaquin Phoenix, Ted Danson and other high-profile environmentalists, tensions have sharpened. Protestors have repeatedly clashed with the fishermen. Nets and boats have been sabotaged, activists arrested and several environmental groups have been effectively banned from the town.

Foreigners now almost inevitably mean trouble, especially when they come with cameras; locals speak with special venom of a BBC documentary that they say depicted them as barbarians. “One fisherman told me if the whalers could kill me, they would,” says the best-known protestor, Ric O’Barry, who once trained dolphins for the 1960’s TV series ‘Flipper.’ “But I always try to stay on the right side of the law. If I get arrested, I’m out of this fight.”

Around Taiji and in the nearby towns of Kii-Katsuura and Shingu, whale meat has been eaten for hundreds of years, claim local officials. Restaurants and shops offer dolphin and whale sashimi and humpback bacon, along with tuna and shark-fin soup. A canteen next to the Taiji Whale Museum, where trained dolphins and small whales perform tricks for tourists, sells Minke steak, sashimi and whale cutlets in curry sauce in a room decorated with posters of the 80 or so ‘cetaceans of the world’: whales, dolphins and porpoises.

According to local wholesaler Mizutani Ikuo, dolphin meat sells for about 2,000 yen (about US\$16) a kilo, cheaper than beef or whale. Unlike most Japanese children, who have no idea what whale tastes like, Taiji kids know their cetaceans. “I don’t like the taste of dolphin because it smells,” says 9-year-old Utani Rui. “I prefer whale.” Inside the museum, out-of-towners are often stunned to learn of the local tradition. “I’m shocked,” says Shibuya Keiko from Osaka. “I couldn’t imagine eating dolphin. They’re too cute.”



Dolphin meat (iruka, left) and humpback whale in Taiji market

The hunts are notoriously brutal and blue tarpaulin sheets block the main viewing spots overlooking the cove where the killings take place to prevent picture-taking. Beyond the cove, a small fleet of boats surround a pod of migrating dolphins, lower metal poles into the sea and bang them to frighten the animals and disrupt their sonar. Once the panicking, thrashing dolphins are herded into the narrow cove, the fishermen attack them with knives, turning the sea red before dragging them to a harbour-side warehouse for slaughter.

The fishermen, who consider dolphins just big fish, like tuna, are bewildered that anyone would find this cruel, dubbing the weekend protestors ‘extremists.’ “If you walked into an American slaughterhouse for cows it wouldn’t look very pretty either,” says one, who identifies himself only as Kawasaki. “The killing is done in the open here so it looks worse than it is.” Most are descended from families that have been killing and eating the contents of the sea around Taiji for generations and reject arguments that dolphins are ‘special.’ Says Kawasaki: “They’re food, like dogs for the Chinese and Koreans.”

A 1994 statement
[www.furcommission.com/resource/perspect3.h]

tm] by Taiji Mayor S. Hamanaka directly addressed environmentalists in making the case for tradition and the legitimacy of the whale hunt:

We believe we know more about our own sea in Taiji than anyone who lives hundreds or thousands of miles away from us. We also believe we are more concerned with its protection and assume more responsibilities than anybody else in the world. We are sure that the same view is shared by Alaskan Eskimos, Faroese, Greenlanders, Icelanders, Norwegians, and Russians in Chukotka as well. We hope many environmentally concerned people in the industrialized nations will understand our views and trust us as rational and humane people, and stop making whaling a "scape goat" of the environmental crusade and making inhumane attacks on whaling people."

O'Barry claims, however, that he was told in private by town officials that tradition is not the real reason for the hunts. "It's pest-control; they're over-fishing and want to kill the competition for the fish. That's unacceptable. These animals don't have Japanese passports, they belong to the world. They're just trying to get around this town and these 26 guys." He calls the town 'schizophrenic.' "It's as pretty as a 1950s postcard and the people are so friendly, but this secret genocide takes place every year."

The schizophrenia is sharpest, say activists, in the Taiji Whale Museum, where tickets for "whale-watching trips" in dolphin-shaped boats are sold while the non-performing animals bump up against each other in a tiny concrete pool. Trainers here help sort the 'best-looking' dolphins from the kill and train them for use in circuses and aquariums across Asia and Europe.



The Taiji Whale Museum

The museum recently made the world's science pages when the fishermen handed over a rare dolphin with an extra set of fins, possibly proving that they once had legs and lived on land. But O'Barry says the story had a dark side. "The Japanese media didn't report that this particular dolphin was taken away from her mother by dolphin trainers. The mother's throat was slit and then she was butchered in the Taiji slaughter house along with more than 200 other bottlenose dolphins."

The bitter controversy over what fishermen in Taiji and other Japanese ports take from the sea is salted with nationalism, one reason why they are backed to the hilt by the Tokyo government. In a country that produces just 40 percent of its own food, fisheries bureaucrats bristle at 'emotional' lectures from Western environmentalists, and amid an intensifying fight for marine resources, they are determined not to yield to them. For some, cetaceans are a line in the sand. "If we lose on whales, what will happen next," asks Nakamae Akira, Deputy Director General of Japan's Fisheries Agency.

'Next' means tuna, a staple of the Japanese diet in contrast to whale, which is a minor delicacy now eaten by a tiny proportion of the population. Japan's voracious appetite for tuna shows no sign of abating: a report last

December claimed that Japanese fishermen poached a staggering 100,000 tons of the coveted southern Bluefin tuna above quota between 1996 and 2005. The Taiji fishermen deny they are taking too much from the sea. "We would be cutting our own throats," says Shimetani Kazutoyo, the sales manager of the dolphin hunters' co-operative in Taiji. The cooperative -- essentially a closed guild -- says it rigidly controls fishing, limiting dolphin hunting to just 26 of the town's 500-odd fishermen.

Taiji's growing Internet fame has widened the cultural gulf between the town and the rest of the world, and most senior officials will no longer talk to Western journalists. But the head of the local board of education, Kita Yoji, who lectures on whaling to schools and colleges, agrees to a brief meeting. Like many in the town hall, he accuses Westerners of failing to understand or explain Japan's culture to their readers and of inciting protestors. But he is guardedly polite until a question about the dangerously high mercury levels detected in whales and dolphins sets him off. "Why pick on those as reasons to stop eating them," he asks, voice rising. "The whole environment is poisoned. There is no point in talking to you because you don't want to listen. That's just racism," he says, standing to terminate the interview.

"It's very difficult," sighs a clerk in the museum. "The town leaders are just so tired of having to deal with this. They want it to go away." There seems little chance they'll get their wish, despite an offer to fund the retirement of the dolphin hunters from a US environmental group. Few in the town took the offer seriously, and the fishermen say they would in any case reject it. "Why should we give up our tradition on the orders of somebody else," says Shimetani.

In a world wracked with wars, greed and environmental destruction, the fate of a few

thousand animals might seem small fry, but activists say the plight of the dolphins is connected to all three. "The dolphin hunt is a symbol of our utilitarian view of nature," says O'Barry. "That we can use and abuse the sea. I honestly believe when the world finds out about this it will be abolished. It can't possibly survive the light of day."

Blue Voice, "Saving Dolphins and Whales. Protecting the Ocean provides podcast videos on the Taiji hunt.

<http://www.bluevoice.org/webfilms.shtml>

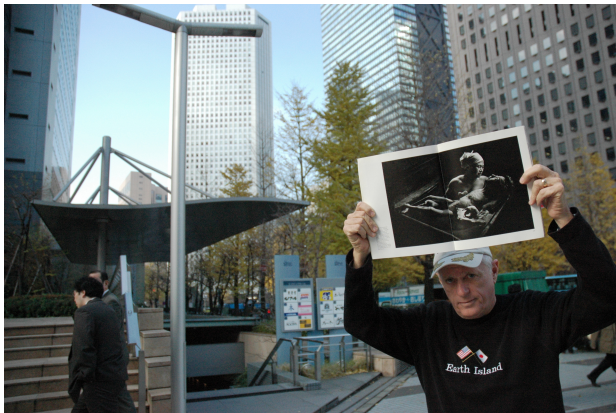
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An Interview with Ric O'Barry

Ric O' Barry is one of the world's best known environmentalists. A former US Navy diver, he later trained the five dolphins that played 'Flipper' in the hit 1960's TV series before turning against dolphin captivity in 1970. He has spent his life since as an animal rights campaigner and much of the last decade fighting what he calls the 'secret genocide' of dolphins in the Wakayama Pref. town of Taiji, where thousands of the animals are killed from October - March every year.

O'Barry travels to the small port town several times a year to film the annual dolphin-hunt for a coalition of environmental groups - www.SaveJapanDolphins.org. He claims he is despised by the town office, trailed by goons and harassed and threatened by whalers. "One fisherman down there told me if the whalers could kill me, they would," he says. "I was kind of flattered. They call me 'Samurai dolphin man,' which shows that at least they respect me."

Oddly, the first time the 67-year-old visited Taiji in 1975, he met the mayor and was given the keys to the town after leading a campaign against a US boycott of Japanese products led by anti-whalers that he considered ‘racist.’ He still believes boycotts will not stop whaling. “Boycotts are completely useless because the Japanese people don’t even know about this. They are a blanket condemnation of the Japanese people, and dolphin hunt is led by just 26 fishermen.”



O’Barry believes the dolphin-hunt only survives because the Japanese media avoids reporting it. “This would not survive anywhere else in the free world. It’s amazing to me that the media ignores this. When you go there you’re photographing a cover-up. They’re trying to keep this a secret from the world.” He says the world is ‘gradually waking up’ and hints at a possible UN initiative to stop the hunt. “I honestly believe when the world finds out about this it will be abolished. It can’t possibly survive the light of day.”

What makes you so angry about this story?

That the Japanese people don’t know that the largest slaughter of cetaceans in the world -- 36,000 a year -- is taking place in their own waters, at Taiji, Iwate and Futo; and they don’t know that the Japanese people are hated around the world for this. The Japanese media is to blame for this blackout. That’s a story in

itself. It’s very hard to get information on how many they capture in Taiji, but it is probably about 2,300 dolphins.

Tell me about why you switched sides in 1970.

I captured about 100 dolphins myself, back in the 1960s, including the five that played Flipper. I was the highest-paid animal trainer in the world. If I wanted I could set up one of these dolphin training programs and make 3-4 million dollars a year. I changed when Flipper died in my arms from suicide. I use that word with some trepidation but I don’t know another word that describes self-induced asphyxiation. Dolphins and other whales are not automatic breathers. Every breath that they take is a conscious effort, which is why they don’t sleep. If life becomes miserable, they just don’t take the next breath. Flipper looked me in the eye and stopped breathing.

In those days I was as ignorant as I could be. Now I am against captivity. It has no socially redeeming feature. It is not educational. How come I can’t find one person among the millions who have visited the 50 dolphin facilities in Japan who is against this industry? I organize a worldwide protest outside consulates every year and the only city where I can’t get a protest going is Tokyo. So what is the value of having dolphins on display if it doesn’t sensitize people? It is just casual amusement. It is a form of bad education that serves to perpetuate our utilitarian relationship with nature.

Flipper was the best and the worst thing that ever happened to dolphins. It exposed the world to dolphins but it also created these captors and the desire to hug them and kiss them and love them to death. Dolphins hate captivity. You’ll see them in the Taiji Whale Museum with their head lying up against the tank, saying ‘how do I get out of here.’ Do I feel responsibility? I have trouble sometimes

sleeping at night. Guilt is not too strong a word. I'm not motivated by guilt, although I used to be. Now this is who I am: I eat, sleep and live this life and won't stop this campaigning until I draw my last breath.

You say there are two parts to this trade, right?

Yes, in Taiji they separate out the best-looking dolphins and export them for use in circus acts, aquariums and so on to places like China, the Philippines, perhaps Germany. We know there are Germans down there hiding from the cameras. Those are worth about 100,000 dollars a piece; in my day a dolphin was worth 300-350 dollars. The rest are slaughtered and are worth about 600 dollars each.

The Fisheries Agency says that Japan is a very crowded island that depends on the sea for food. They get angry when they are lectured by Westerners.

Well, there is a way to harvest their food from the sea but they're involved in over-fishing. The driftnets they use are a way of strip-mining the ocean. This is why all fish stocks are expected to collapse by 2047. It is not just Japan: all of the countries have been irresponsible. It is international corporate greed. I see the dolphin as a reference point and a symbol of our relationship with the sea, and look what we're doing to them.

The truth is, Japan is a wealthy country and they don't need to eat dolphin meat. The real reason for this slaughter is they are over-fishing and want to kill the competition for the fish. It is pest control. That's what they told me in a closed meeting. That's unacceptable. These animals are not owned by Japan; they don't have Japanese passports, they belong to the world. They're just trying to get around this town and these 26 guys.

If you go to the Tokyo zoo, the snake is given

more consideration in captivity than the dolphin. The snake is given some grass, and tree limbs to climb over. But the dolphin, which is a sonic creature, is confined to a bare concrete box. You wouldn't even do it to a snake! The tanks in the Taiji museum are some of the smallest in the world. It is more stressful for dolphins in captivity than any other animal in the world.

You've met the whalers?

Oh yeah. I asked them if they were worried about mercury poisoning. Dolphin meat contains very high levels of mercury. But they said: 'The meat is safe and the government wouldn't lie.' So I asked them, what about Minamata? Governments protect corporations, not people. The whalers of course know not what they do, but the trainers do: that infuriates me. They know they are killing animals that are self-aware. They give them names, they look into the eyes of the dolphins and tell lies that they are helping to educate the public. Then they look on as they are slaughtered.

I don't sit at the right hand side of god criticizing what everybody does, but if you're asking me if it's ok for Japan to export its poison to China and elsewhere, when they know it is poisoned, I think it is morally repugnant and ethically untenable; these are crimes against humanity. They put this stuff on the shelves where pregnant women and children can eat it. Go to the hospitals around Taiji and you'll find evidence of mercury-poisoned people.

Of course, many Japanese would say, well, 'why can't we kill dolphins? What is special about them?' People around the world eat cows, lambs and small birds; some also eat dogs.

Well, I stop them there because most people eat animals in captivity. They're mixing domesticated animals with wildlife.

That doesn't really make much difference to the animals though, does it? They don't know they're wildlife.

Yes, that's true but people in the animal community are working on this stuff too. I'm not saying it is right to kill lambs either. I consider myself a vegetarian but if I'm in the jungles of Guatemala, Columbia, Brazil; remote places like that, I eat what I can. But given a choice, I wouldn't consume animals.

There is very good documentation of dolphins saving the lives of human beings. That is altruism and something special. That is communication. Unlike other animals in the zoo, they're self-aware animals that routinely make choices about their lives. They've been here for 65 million years and are very intelligent. They're entitled to freedom. Driving them into a secret cove and butchering them is simply wrong.

When did you start going to Taiji?

I knew about the slaughter about 10 years ago but I was under the impression that other NGOs were working on it. I didn't realize until I came here that all they're doing is putting these graphic pictures on their websites and telling people to write to the prime minister of Japan. And that won't stop it.

The Japanese groups are under an umbrella and they're all upset with me because they don't like westerners coming here and interfering. They say 'we've been working on this for 20 years.' I say, 'So how come the Japanese people don't know this is going on? What have you been doing for 20 years? They say we're not against whaling, we're for the whales. It is some kind of politically correct, fucking mumbo-jumbo, what does it mean?'

You don't accept that this is tradition.

Traditional whaling might be going out in a

canoe and killing one dolphin for Christmas. I wouldn't be opposed to that either. But that's not what they're doing. This is the largest slaughter of dolphins in the world. They're creating the illusion this is tradition and it is not; it is genocide. We have to oppose this absolutely and I am doing everything in my power to stop it, short of breaking the law. If I do, I'll not be able to return and I'll be out of the fight.

In Japan, once you've been labeled a criminal you're out of the fight and they'd love to get rid of me: I'm the biggest thorn in their side. I bring and encourage journalists to go there and report it, including the BBC. 300 million people saw a recent BBC documentary on Taiji. And that's why the dolphin hunters hate me because they told me. 'If the world finds out about this we'll have to stop.' This kind of evil only thrives in the dark.

Japanese will say you have no right to tell them what to eat.

They're not their dolphins, they don't carry Japanese passports; they belong to the planet. And this is a national park: what right do you have to kills animals in a national park. Is there another park that would do this? Also, they have no right to block people taking pictures of this. Japanese people can come to the US and take pictures of what they like in America.

But the fast food industry in America would hardly appreciate tourists taking pictures of US slaughter houses, would they?

Well sure, if you go into the slaughter house, but Japanese tourists can go to the slaughter houses and bear witness to what happens.

Do you think that people like you only make the whalers dig their heels in?

It does and I've come to believe that only the Japanese people can stop this problem. I'm just a spark plug. Japanese have to do it but they

don't have the information because of the suppression of information here. The media is in violation of Article 21. People are never told about it, so my job is to get the information out.

Who pays for these trips to Japan?

I'm part of a coalition of non-profit environmental groups. We can be found at savejapandolphin.org: the Earth Island Institute, Animal Welfare Institute and In Defense of Animals. Our members pay for me to go to Japan but it is a struggle to raise the money. We monitor the treatment of dolphins around the world; so tuna boats are a problem, because dolphins travel above the tuna and the boats put a net around everything and kill everything, including the dolphins.

The only thing that ended that practice in the US was public outrage. Now, when people buy their tuna in the US, they know it didn't involve killing dolphins because it says so on the tins. We've also closed 50 substandard dolphinariums around the world. If there's a dolphin in trouble anywhere in this planet, my phone rings and my e-mail box fills up. I have to rescue them.

Rick O'Barry's website, including a video on the dolphin hunt in Taiji, is www.savejapandolphins.org

David McNeill writes about Japan for the London Independent and other publications. He is a Japan Focus coordinator. Posted at Japan Focus on January 2, 2007.