



Japanese Dolphin Drive Hunts: Right or Wrong?

Kjeld Duits

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By Kjeld Duits

[The issue of whale hunting, centered on species extinction has produced a firestorm of criticism by Greenpeace and other environmental groups of the whaling practice of Japan and other powers. Kjeld Duits here opens the door on an ethical issue that does not pivot on questions of extinction but poses questions of the smallscale but brutal killing of dolphins. The questions extend far beyond the dolphin hunt in a small sea community to the killing of cattle and chickens on a massive scale, practices that take place throughout the industrial world and beyond. Japan Focus.]

On the coast of the small Japanese town of Taiji some ten fishing boats are bobbing quietly up and down on the quiet waves. Fishermen on the boats beat on long metal poles which are stuck into the water. At the end of each pipe is a metal disc which drives the noise into the water like a loudspeaker. About five dolphins flee the terrifying sound, in front of the bows of the boats. For hundreds of years this dolphin hunt has been taking place. Now it has to stop say nature activists.

Taiji is one of the last places where you'd expect a worldwide controversy to erupt. The little town, with 3,600 inhabitants more village than town, lies hidden in a far away corner of the prefecture of Wakayama. Not one highway reaches here, only local roads and a single train track. Even with the fastest express train requires almost 4 hours from Osaka, center of West Japan.

Each year, from October through April, fishermen here hunt the passing schools of dolphins. Between one and two thousand of them are caught each year. First they drive the dolphins into a bay. This is immediately closed with two nets. The next day the dolphins are caught, one by one. Fishermen quickly drive a long metal pin into the neck of each dolphin. Within seconds they are dead. Until recently their throats were slit, but Japanese authorities have stopped that method. It sometimes took minutes for the dolphins to die. There was clearly a lot of suffering.

Even with this new method it is no pretty sight. The blood of the dolphins slowly colors the sea red, and the streamlined bodies look deeply sad in their lifelessness. This is what you usually see in a slaughter house, but few of us ever go there. It is far removed from our image of cheery animals that enthusiastically jump out of the water. Not all dolphins are killed. An increasing number are caught alive and are sent to aquariums and dolphinariums.

Former dolphin trainer Rick O'Barry says that he often cried while watching these hunts. Famous for his work as trainer in the American TV series Flipper, he has been striving to protect dolphins for many years. He is one of the organizers of the worldwide demonstrations against Japanese dolphin drive hunts that are taking place on Saturday October 8. He calls the hunts on dolphins, which take place at two locations in Japan, a "crime against nature".

"These are no fish," explains O'Barry passionately, "They are self aware creatures that routinely make choices and decisions regarding the details of their life. They are entitled to freedom of choice, thus they are entitled to freedom."

Intelligence plays an important role says O'Barry. "The fact is, dolphins are more like gorillas or humans than fish. But they are treated the same way as tuna."

O'Barry's opposition to the hunting of dolphins is "absolute". It doesn't matter that the dolphin species in question are not endangered, holds the former trainer. "It's not about science, it's about ethics. Does an animal have to be close to extinction before we treat the animal with respect?"

Kita Yoji, spokesman of Taiji and former head of the Whale Museum, says he has trouble with the reasoning that intelligence adds to the value of a creature. "That would also mean that if something is dumb, it will have fewer rights. It is also said that dolphins are cute, and that it is sad to kill them. Is it then allowed to kill ugly creatures?" "Many western people," explains Mayor Sangen, say that they feel it is not right to hunt an animal that swims around freely. But from our perspective, it is strange to keep an animal to eat it. We find all those cows very sad."

Whaling -- the dolphin drive hunts are seen as part of whaling -- as cultural heritage also plays an important role in the lives of the inhabitants of Taiji. Taiji is famous in Japan as "whale city". Next year it celebrates 400 years of whaling here. For years it was Taiji's most important industry. Every part of the whale was used. "When I was a kid we even chewed on pieces of skin as a snack," says Seko Teruto (61), chairman of the local fisheries cooperation.

That feeling is strong among Taiji's inhabitants. "I felt deeply moved," says 30-year old Ikeda Remi, law student and inhabitant of of Taiji, "when I watched the fishermen today." "Traditional Japan the way it was, is left alive here. In this ultra modern world of computers and media society, you can still see this very old aspect of our culture. It fascinates me."

At its height in the 60s, some 500 people worked in Taiji's whaling industry. It brought in 60 percent of the town's tax income. "Now that is only 100 people, and two to three percent of tax income," says Sangen. "There is no other place in the world that has such a long whaling history," explains Kita. "We see it as a cultural heritage of humankind. This is truly native culture. Wouldn't it be good if there is one place left on the world where this culture is left alive?"

In recent years the controversy over the dolphin drive hunts has gained a new aspect. Research by, among others, Professor Endo of the Medical University of Hokkaido has shown that dolphin meat has a high ratio of methyl mercury. No less than 7 parts per million (ppm). Methyl mercury affects the nervous system. Tuna is famous for having a high ratio of methyl mercury, but it only has 0.7 ppm. "If you often eat dolphin meat," explains the professor, "for example 100 grams three times a week, you certainly will get sick. It is a matter of course that you'd better not eat it. Pregnant women and small children should certainly not eat it."

The organizations that demonstrate against the drive hunts consider it irresponsible that dolphin meat is put on the market. "If it is true," says O'Barry, "that the dolphin meat is indeed poisoned with mercury, willfully allowing the unsuspecting Japanese public to consume this mercury poison is in my opinion a crime against humanity. That is a very strong charge against the Japanese government, I know. But I stand by my statement."

"Scientists," says Kita, "often give out figures without further explanation. This figure only says something about the situation now, and nothing about the past ten, twenty years. We see no problems and also have no victims of mercury poisoning in this town."

"Moreover," says Mayor Sangen, "I don't think that people will eat dolphin meat much longer. The younger generation is not used to it. It is taboo to say this, but I believe it will end within ten years."

The dolphin drive hunt seems an almost impossible knot to untie. There are at least three vastly difficult ethical questions in play. Do people have the right to use and abuse other animals? May intelligence play a role? Do people have the right to force their own beliefs onto others?

For at least the last question Ikeda Remi has a ready answer: "I don't believe the whole world should become the same."

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