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Overfishing to Overconsume. Lure of money set to empty the oceans

By Mark Brazil

A friend of mine who lives in the picturesque port city of Otaru, western Hokkaido, is a fish-hunter. He loves to dive, and hunts for fish with a spear gun -- seafood is his manna from heaven.

The Harbor at Rausu in Hokkaido ablaze with lights in years past as its fishing fleet docked loaded with walleye pollack (above). Catches of the fish once seemed boundless, but even fishermen now admit that overfishing has blighted the fishery.

Visiting him for dinner recently, I was astonished by a creature on my plate that I had not encountered before -- though that is not so difficult in a country with a seemingly greater range of seafood available for consumption than any other. This creature was like a huge krill or shrimp, somewhat like the kind that I grew up in Britain calling a "prawn." But what was most strange about it, were its front appendages, which were just like the arms of a preying mantis. Some investigation revealed that this was Squilla oratoria, and its vernacular name is, not surprisingly, Japanese mantis shrimp (shako in Japanese). The search for that information led me to an interesting web site, which you might find a useful starting point for any quest for information about marine life.

Such a quest would be nothing if not timely, since marine matters have been much in the news of late. There has been the Japanese government admitting to having been overfishing southern bluefin tuna, and so having its annual quota cut in half for five years; Iceland commencing commercial whaling with the recent catch of an endangered 20-meter-long fin whale; and a Japanese Fisheries Agency report recommending halving the catch or imposing a ban on catching walleye pollack (suketo-dara in Japanese), fishing for which has been banned in the Bering Sea -- where they are known as Alaska pollack -- since 1993).

High mercury levels

In addition, there was news revealed in The Japan Times on Nov. 1 that the Taiji dolphin hunt in Wakayama Prefecture is taking animals with extremely high levels of mercury and providing them for sale to consumers; and BBC television also broadcast a prime-time news item on the fate of global fish stocks, citing evidence that the majority of commercial fishery stocks will be effectively extinct by the late 2040s.

So much news about the marine environment, and none of it good, points to an alarming shift in marine resources from being seemingly

inexhaustible, to almost gone. How is it then that people in Japan can consume marine products as if they will last forever? That is something I have pondered long and hard, and I wonder whether a simple "wheel" analogy isn't a reasonable explanation -- but more of that later.

My first exposure to a frenetic fishery came one winter's night on the Shiretoko Peninsula in Hokkaido's far northeast. I recall my first visit there to the town of Rausu; it must have been sometime in 1982 or 1983. It was after dark, snow was lashing down, and Rausu harbor was ablaze with lights. Gangs of workers clad in oilskins were hunkered down on the rear decks of each of dozens of fishing boats, deftly flicking fish from heaps of nets with hand hooks as the snow cascaded around them. Crates of fish -- walleye pollack -- were being tossed onto conveyor belts, and rows of trucks were being loaded to take the catch far to the south out of town.

Over the years, I watched Rausu boom: new roads with bigger snow tunnels, new houses (ever larger) and new harbor walls were all constructed on the back of that endless marine cornucopia.

Meanwhile, newer and newer boats appeared, and I saw the fleet leaving harbor before dawn each day (I was there to watch Steller's eagles) like a flickering constellation of lights on the dark and icy waters of the channel separating Hokkaido from Kunashiri Island. The fleet worked pretty much round-the-clock. Gangs of seasonal workers helped unload up to three catches a day, and the fishing boats came back to harbor so ladened down with their catches that they looked likely to sink.

A decade on, and the marine bounty was just as evident; the hustle and bustle incredible. A second decade on, however, and the cracks were beginning to show; catches were down, the returning boats were not so deeply laden, and the number of trips per day and per week had been reduced.

Visit the town now and you'll find little evidence of the thriving bustle there was around the harbor in the early 1990s. In fact, watchers on shore these days cannot tell how much the boats have caught -- they all ride so high in the water now when they return with their small catches.

In the late 1990s, I was involved in filming at Rausu with the BBC for a round-the-world millennium special they were making, titled "Global Sunrise." We took the opportunity to interview the captain of the fishing boat we chartered to take us out to the sea-ice to film me with Steller's sea eagles. I asked the captain whether he was concerned about falling fish stocks, and whether he really blamed the decline on seals and sea lions (an excuse that is commonly used). Off the record, he admitted that he was concerned -- and that of course overfishing (not seals or sea lions) was the problem. But he said that he felt powerless to do anything, because if he reduced his fishing effort, he alone would lose out. The fishermen, he said -- like the store-owners selling mercury-laden dolphin meat in Taiji -- won't stop without being given a clear directive from above.

Similarly, the national government's tendency to urge people to take voluntary action -- whether to drive safely, reduce consumption, or not sell contaminated meat -- simply doesn't take human nature into account. Where there's money to be made, made it will be -- until it becomes illegal.

Seemingly endless supply

In Rausu, however, one far-sighted fisherman has become so concerned about the decline in the winter fishing there, and its impact on his lifestyle and the area's annual overwintering sea eagles, that he has started a new business. Instead of fishing the sea empty for all he's worth, he is now providing fish for the sea eagles to attract paying eco-tourists.

If global fish stocks are in such crisis that the BBC headlined its news report stating that by 2048 almost all commercial fisheries would be extinct (that is, reduced by 95 percent), how is it that here in Japan there seems such an endless supply that consumers barely raise an eyebrow?

The next time you sit down in a sushi shop, give a thought to the fact that the fare on offer may have come from the other side of the world. An early-morning visit to the Tsukiji Fish Market in Tokyo provides an incredible education into the diversity of marine life. There, seafood, from fleets around the world, awaits its buyers. A National Geographic report described Tsukiji as a fish market "in the sense that the Grand Canyon is a ditch or Caruso was a crooner. Among the wholesale fish markets of the world, Tsukiji ranks at the top in every measurable category. It handles more than 400 different types of seafood and imports from 60 countries on six continents."

I see Tsukiji as representative of the totality of the Japanese seafood market, a kind of hub at the center of a massive wheel whose spokes -- its supply lines -- extend across the world's oceans on the wheel's rim. If you live near the hub, supplies just keep pouring in from every direction -- and you'll be the last to notice problems out on the rim. Out there, as one fishery declines another takes its place; spokes are lost now and then, but at the hub all seems fine.

It's only if you travel out to the rim of the wheel, visit the individual fisheries and inquire about the local stocks that you see the crisis building.

Of course, some of Japan's own local fisheries represent part of that rim, and the fate of Hokkaido's walleye pollack fishery simply fits the oft-repeated pattern: Find a hitherto unutilized fish stock, build up an unsustainable fishery based on it -- and, before you know it, another stock is in decline toward commercial extinction.

Sustainable levels

Where will it all end?

Well, according to the BBC it will end in the collapse of all commercial fisheries within the next 40 years. We will have simply consumed them all. Fish farming doesn't even begin to make up the shortfall. Only reduced consumption, fixed quotas in managed systems, and sustainable fishing levels can save many marine species from extinction -- and my fish-hunting friend from being unable to amaze and delight me with marine fare he caught himself to put on his guest's dinner plate.

Mark Brazil teaches biodiversity and conservation at Rakuno Gakuen University, Hokkaido. His first book, "A Birdwatcher's Guide to Japan," is now out of print, and highly collectible, but the author has some mint-condition signed copies available. Anyone interested, please contact him by e-mail at markbrazil@world.email.ne.jp

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