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A Solution to the Whaling Issue? Former MOFA spokesman speaks out.

David McNeill and Taniguchi Tomohiko

Regular as the tides, the whaling controversy comes to revisit Japan. Once again, the nation's fleet ploughs the waters of the Antarctic on its annual "scientific whaling" expedition, a controversial euphemism for what much of the world views as commercial whaling in disguise. This winter, the fleet plans to harpoon 935 minke and 50 fin whales. Again, the chorus of disapproval has been predictable. As the whalers battle militant conservationist group Sea Shepherd, which harries the fleet every year, Japan's diplomats work to sooth diplomatic feathers.

Video of Sea Shepherd confronting the Japanese whaling fleet Feb 6, 2009.

In June, the International Whaling Commission will host its annual meeting; a tired, irritable ritual stubbornly deadlocked between pro- and anti-whaling camps.

Over two decades since Japan was forced to abandon commercial whaling by a 1986 IWC moratorium, the whaling appears as intractable as ever. Japan, or at least the country's Fisheries Agency, says it has the right to sustainably hunt whales in the sea "commons," most of which end up in supermarkets, restaurants and meat suppliers. Australia, New Zealand and the rest of the anti-whaling camp demand an end to the annual hunt on conservationist and humane grounds. Both assiduously court supporters in the IWC but neither can score the knockout blow that would give them victory. Rhetoric and grandstanding has replaced debate and compromise, and the killing of whales continues.

Sea Shepherd rams the Hushin Maru on February 6, 2009.

Recent discussions on the sidelines of the IWC offer slivers of hope. Over the last two years, a working group of 28 nations, including Japan and the United States, has met twice in an attempt to solve the dispute. Their proposal, set for presentation at this year's IWC meeting, would essentially cede a long-standing Japanese demand to be allowed to kill minke whales around its own coast in return for concessions on the Antarctic hunt. But controversy lurks close to the surface. Conservationists say the solution opens the backdoor to a return of commercial whaling. Japan refuses to abandon high seas whaling, though it says it may cut the size of its annual cull. Suspicions linger that the Fisheries

Agency is using the cull as leverage in a bid to win concessions for four small but politically significant coastal towns.

Into this debate comes a remarkable pitch by Taniguchi Tomohiko, former deputy press secretary of Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA). After years spent defending Japan's case to the Western media, Taniguchi appears, in an essay published in the February issue of the Tokyo-based Wedge magazine, to have had a change of heart. The battle to defend high seas whaling is expensive, hurts Japan's national interests and damages its relations with allies. Even more important, it is unwinnable, he says. Tokyo will never swing the IWC back away from its commercial whaling roots, so the answer is obvious: abandon the Antarctic and focus instead on nurturing the nation's struggling small coastal whalers. "I personally think there is no national benefit to insisting on fighting a losing-war while at the same time losing unnecessarily large numbers of friends," he writes.

Conservationists may find little comfort in Taniguchi's essay. He does not give an inch on Japan's right to hunt whales, which he believes is incontrovertible. He dubs anti-whaling activists "hooligans" and proselytizes for the development of a profitable and sustainable industry. He predicts that Japan will eventually win this debate and defends scientific whaling as "legitimate." But he also states -- in the clearest possible way -- that the economic benefit to Japan from whaling is nil and acknowledges that domestic debate on the issue has been inadequate and irrational. Most important of all, he helps legitimize an argument long held by anti-whaling activists: that Japan must come out of the trenches where it has been dug in for two decades and begin the search for a lasting solution.

The key question is, does Taniguchi stand for current thinking at MOFA? There are long-standing and well-known tensions between it and the Fisheries Agency, which exclusively controls policy on whaling, often to the discomfort of Japanese diplomats. MOFA officials insist that Taniguchi has left their ranks and speaks only for himself. On the surface at least, nothing has changed. But someday Taniguchi's salvo may be seen as the first crack in the bureaucratic front for Japan's whaling campaign. David McNeill

What the media never reports: The Inside story of Japanese Whaling: "Spending taxes but losing friends"

Taniguchi Tomohiko

The Japanese whaling fleet [in the southern oceans) has again been harassed by anti-whaling activists; the sea battle has became a regular annual event, covered in a sensational way by the media. The author of this article can state unequivocally that Japan will not give in because of those obstacles, but the question is: what is the national benefit of whaling? This article was written by one whose position as a Foreign Ministry spokesman required that he explain Japanese whaling practices to the English-speaking media. He now believes that abolishing research whaling and protecting local small size whaling is the way to balance the national benefit.

Two types of whaling Japan practices:

Japan should consider the national benefit of whaling on a broader scale and end deep-ocean research whaling. As an alternative, we should find a way to preserve the culture of eating whale and whale-meat distribution by making the business of small-scale whaling around the Japanese coast more profitable. Even as I write, Japanese whaling ships are being chased by anti-whaling hooligans in the Antarctic Ocean. It is painful to watch, or yield to that pressure, so what we need is to solve the problem by looking more broadly at the balance of national interest.

There are two types of whaling: deep sea whaling for months with a fleet of ships, and daytrip whaling around the local coast. It's been some time since the International Whaling Conference (IWC) considered those two types of whaling commercially viable, which is why they have stopped them across-the-board.

Whales

Only Japan continues with both types of whaling. Japan argues that pelagic whaling is for scientific research, which is treated as an exception by the IWC. Local, small-scale hunts target only whales that the IWC does not protect.

At successive IWC conferences, Japan has justified deep-ocean research whaling. Using its own research results, Japan says it is confident that there are enough whales to re-start commercial whaling. Moreover, Japan wants the IWC to accept the local hunting of some small-type whales as commercially profitable.

Specifically, Japan wants to add minke whales to its list, but this would involve IWC approval of commercial whaling, so it is unlikely that the organization will accept this. However, there are approved cases, such as Denmark and Iceland, who do this kind of whaling to preserve their heritage. Japan believes that the same dispensation should be provided to its own small-scale whaling.

Basically then, Japan is seeking to engage both in research whaling that leads back to commercial whaling and to preserve local hunts. But fulfilling both of these aims won't work. Research whaling brings in mainly minke whales, but bringing large quantities of high quality whale meat of this kind lowers the market price. This creates a vicious circle for local small-size whaling companies, who cannot make enough profit.

What is needed is that Japan abandon research whaling and negotiate to make local whaling more profitable. We will never win if

we keep fighting to convert research whaling to commercial whaling.

Japan is the only country that does deep-ocean whaling. This is why it takes more flak than Norway, which ignores the IWC and continues commercial whaling, despite the fact that Japan engages in scientific research activity. The key difference is that Norway only practices whaling in its own territorial sea.

The thing is, culture is relative and forcing certain values on others does no good. Of course we cannot go along with the idea of feeling sorry for whales or viewing Japanese as uncivilized. Japan's philosophy is natural, but you might want to think twice after considering some facts.

There is no other issue that makes Australia and England dislike Japan more. We need to be reminded that the countries that criticize us are all extremely important to us. We need to focus on understanding our national interests and seek a balance in benefit and loss. I personally think there is no national benefit to insisting on fighting a losing-war while at the same time losing unnecessarily large numbers of friends.

There is no longer an economic rationality to whaling

Consider the economics of Japanese whaling. Whale meat is now only meaningful as a rare delicacy on Japanese tables. The size of the annual market for the meat is just seven billion yen, and even the most optimistic estimates stay within ten billion yen.

According to the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, fishery output per annum is valued at over one trillion yen. Whales occupy less than one percent of that total.

No private company hunts outside of Japan's territorial sea -- only the government. The government employs just 330 regular employees at The Institute of Cetacean Research and Kyodou Senpaku.

Meanwhile, local whaling is in crisis. There are just five seaworthy boats in all Japan, and 31 crewmembers. In 2007, the average catch for one boat was worth 64.6 million yen, but the average cost of sending out a boat was over 95 million yen. The more a boat sails, the more the loss seems to grow.

As this shows, from the economic point of view the Japanese national benefit from whaling is, nil. This should be recognized before we start the debate. So we can assume from this that what our country is trying to protect is not the economy, but some other values.

Japan's behavior on the issue has hardened over the years so it will not be easy to change. What keeps pro-whaling people active is the sense that "Justice belongs to us" which they get from fighting the anti-whaling activists. Since they believe they're right, there is no space for compromise. They appear to believe that holding onto an uncompromising attitude is almost a virtue, and that this is a national benefit.

If it is difficult to break this logjam, so we leave our hopes in the government, that it will change the situation. However, small groups that make a lot of noise tend to be influential, because most politicians don't care about the issues. Even though this process seems to contradict democratic principles, this is the tendency in the whaling debate.

There is a similar picture in the mass media. The press reflects the lack of interest in whaling by the majority of the population and ignores the issue except when there is a juicy story, such as conflict at the IWC international conference or an attack on a Japanese ship. Both politicians and public opinion are fired up and there is no rational consideration about the national benefit.

Nevertheless Japan has sound arguments

As we will see, Japan has sound arguments. So it can be seen as weak for us to just give in. However, sound arguments or not, we need to reconsider whether Japan will ever win the argument and if it does whether it will turns its friends into enemies.

According to IWC Article 8, Japan is practicing scientific whaling not commercial whaling.

Under the agreement, member countries can grant permission to certain organizations to whale only for purposes of scientific research. In Japan, the designated organization is the Institute of Cetacean Research (ICR), a foundation managed by the agriculture ministry.

Actual whaling operations have been conducted by a corporation called the Kyodou Senpaku, commissioned by the ICR. Their main office is in Chuo-ku, Tokyo in the same building as the ICR office.

Under the terms of the research, the Japanese government orders the catching (and killing) of a large number of whales. This is to determine the population size, to generate more accurate statistics, and to collect earwax, which is used to determine the age of whales. But Japan's fleet mainly catches minke whales, which are common, and if the research can be done without killing whales the fleet will do so.

On February 6, 2009 a Japanese factory ship the

Nishin Maru pulled in a Minke whale.

The fleet catches nearly a thousand whales, brings them back to Japan and sells them in the market. This is not classified as commercial whaling and it is done under IWC Article 8, which says that whales caught for research should be used for beneficial or non-profit use.

The Japanese government interprets this to mean that if we eat and do not throw away the meat, it is beneficially used. The sales are used to fund the following year's research whaling costs so it is not commercial. Anti-whaling groups accuse Japan of being evasive, but at least its actions are legal.

If we count on tax, then it's not business

As we can see, research whaling is legitimate. The Japanese government believes that justice is on our side so there is no need to compromise, let alone accept that our actions are illegal. They take further steps by saying that after we acquire enough information, we should re-start commercial whaling.

What Japan says is true, but it still cannot be supported. Re-opening commercial whaling is completely impossible in terms of the IWC's internal dynamics and our country's whaling situation.

Getting three out of four supporters to change their existing stance is an impossibly high wall to climb. Neither the pro-whaling countries led by Japan nor anti-whaling countries led by the UK can get three out of four votes. If Japan does not stop research whaling, it will never be able to re-start commercial whaling.

This is why some Japanese people want to leave the IWC. But if we do, we will lose our justification for research whaling in the deep oceans. Australia and New Zealand would argue for whaling sanctuaries and would enforce the law strictly, which would prevent deep-ocean whaling even if Japan opts out of the IWC. It might also provoke a diplomatic crisis.

So opting out is unlikely to happen, but even if Japan's request to resume commercial whaling were to be accepted, there would be no commercial whaling. It is simply because the economics of whaling are that severe. Even though the ICR alone provides whale meat, their business is highly unstable.

ICR financial statements reveal stunning records of long-term loans amounting to a liability of 2.1 billion yen. On the asset side, there is not enough to cover this debt so the company's financial situation remains a concern. The organization which lent the money to ICR is called the Overseas Fishery Cooperation Foundation (OFCF) (the president used was the director of the Fisheries Agency), which is an offshoot of the agriculture ministry. As a result, ICR pays almost zero interest on the debt.

In September 2008, ICR recorded a loss of over 7.78 million yen. It received 9.08 million yen, which is more than seventy percent of last year's subsidy, from taxpayers. Of course it is a long way from making up its deficit.

The financial situation of Kyodou Senpaku, the company commissioned by ICR, is unknown, but according to an estimate by a credit research company, it makes about ten to twenty million yen profit a year. Even if it's not actually in deficit, it is doubtful that the company has enough income to renew its facilities. The mother whaling ship is near the end of its life.

In sum, the economic performance of Japanese whaling is poor. The prospect of re-starting commercial whaling seems impossible with the IWC, and even if it was accepted, no one wants to get involved in a business that lack of commercial prospects.

We need to balance our national interests

Today, Japan is the IWC co-chair with the US. Both countries are making admirable efforts, which are enabling the organization to be a place for debate and not just conflict. But still, the attitudes of countries such as Australia don't change. Also, the re-opening of commercial whaling still seems impossible for approval by the IWC.

To make the story short, Japan might turn its allies or semi-allies such as England, Australia, Canada and the US into enemies by insisting on something that is economically unprofitable and unfeasible. It won't change the tough situation for the back-to-the-wall domestic small whaling companies either.

Given this situation, if we continue to use tax money and public funds in a losing war and worsen Japan's reputation, it will hurt our national interests.

The solution will come when Japan ends research whaling and negotiates to allow local companies to catch minke whales instead. Minke whales are available around the Japan Sea. The companies will be able to make a living by catching the profitable and rare whale. They can also conserve a rare delicacy and the local whaling culture.

Of course, scientists at ICR are passionate about research whaling, so they will surely seek to continue their campaign using public expenses. But it is inevitable that nonlethal research is going be the main game in town. It is the world standard, so this is not a case of being unfair to Japan.

Therefore, if our country stops research whaling, it would be beneficial for Japan in a broad sense. Not only that, I believe it would conserve the whaling culture, but this is a personal opinion and does not represent the thought of any of the organizations to which I once belonged or currently belong.

Taniguchi Tomohiko was deputy press secretary at Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 2005 to July 2008. He is a former Nikkei Business Magazine journalist and an ex-president of the London Foreign Press Association. This essay appeared in the February edition of Wedge magazine. It was translated by Negishi Masumi.

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