

Taiji: Building a Future On Whaling Legacy

Taiji in Wakayama Prefecture is a small town of only 4,200 with the shape of a tiny peninsula clinging to the rugged shoreline on the southeastern coast of the Kii Peninsula. This is where coastal whaling first became an organized industry in Japan, in 1606. In days past the whole village turned out at a whale sighting and the little bay rang with the shouts of brave whalers who confronted their prey with only small boats, nets and hand-held harpoons.

Today Taiji's natural harbor is the home port for coastal and open-sea tuna fishing fleets, but only around 20% of the local work force is involved in the fishing industry. As in other parts of Japan, coastal fishing is a dying industry. There simply are less fish in nearby waters and the fishermen themselves are aging with few young men to succeed them. Between 1984 and 1988, membership in the Taiji fishing cooperative dropped by 13%, the total number of people in the local fishing industry decreasing by as much as 30% over the same period.

Lure for tourists

With the faltering of the fishing industry, Taiji appears to be turning once again to the whale, the primary source of income in its heyday. This time, however, instead of catching whales, Taiji is using the whale to lure tourists to its remote location. The town has, after all, a glorious past, rich in tales of adventure and bravery. "Come to Taiji," say the tourist pamphlets, "for the sun, the Kuroshio Current and the whales." Cars on nearby Route 42 are welcomed by an arch with the words, "Welcome to Taiji, the Town of Whales."

The Japanese had been catching whales since the most ancient times, their primary prey being small whales that wandered into narrow inlets and dead and wounded whales that happened to be washed ashore. But it was the people of Taiji who first organized haphazard



A panoramic model exhibited in the Whale Museum makes visitors realize how the traditional Taiji whaling was conducted.

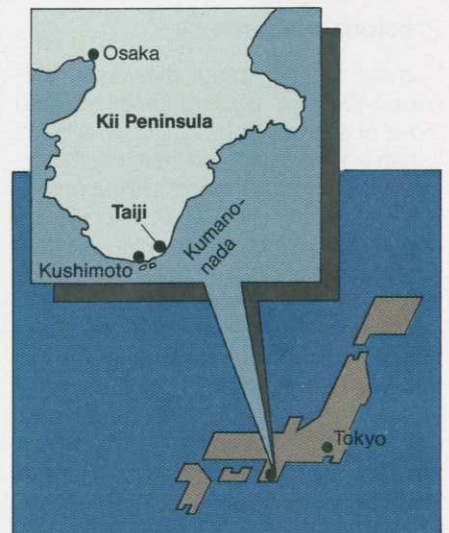
techniques into a systematic industry. They knew from long experience when great herds of migrating whales were likely to pass by. When a sighting was made by a spotter atop high ground, the village whalers would set out all at once in tiny boats carefully synchronized to surround a particular whale so that it could be harpooned. Details of ancient whaling techniques and traditions are given in a history of Taiji whaling published in 1969 after seven years of arduous reading and compilation of ancient documents and records.

Whaling evolved into a full-fledged industry in Japan after the invention of a "harpoon with rope" whaling method at the end of the 16th century. With the new technology, organized coastal whaling spread to the western part of Japan and, from the early to mid-17th century, a number of whaling cooperatives which operated much like large corporations were founded.

The whaling cooperative included not only the fisherfolk who did the actual whaling, but also those on land who cut the whale and processed its various parts; the shipbuilders and net makers; and the blacksmiths who forged the all-important harpoons. A single whaling cooperative included between 300 and 400 people and was usually managed by a powerful local family. Some cooperatives were operated by scores of fishing households who shared the necessary equipment and costs. In the Edo period (1603-1868), *daimyo* lords attracted by the potential profits often set up whaling cooperatives under their direct jurisdiction.

The first full-fledged whaling cooperative was the Wada Whaling Cooperative established by Wada Yorimoto, a wealthy and powerful Taiji resident, in 1606. The Wada Cooperative very soon became rich, even after paying taxes to the Kii fief, and similar cooperatives began to appear elsewhere. In 1675, Yorimoto's grandson, Yoriharu, invented a new whaling technique using net and harpoon. Taiji prospered thereafter, enjoying a leading position in the world of Japanese whaling. Throughout most of the Edo period, whaling was the major fishing industry in the country.

In the early decades of the 19th century, American and other Western whalers began to appear in the waters near Japan causing a rapid decline in the number of whales which passed by the Japanese





The *Kyo-maru No. 11*, a catcher boat once used in Antarctic whaling expeditions, now attracts visitors as a whaling museum.

coast. Their dwindling catch forced the Taiji whalers to make a desperate gamble one stormy day in December 1878. All ships were lost and more than 100 of Taiji's finest drowned. The damage to the village's major industry was considerable and the venerable whaling cooperative fell apart.

No longer was Taiji Japan's leading whaling center in what had become the age of modern Western-style whaling. Nevertheless, small-scale coastal whaling continued to be a mainstay for the Taiji people, and a number of Taiji men signed up as catcher boat crew on Antarctic whaling expeditions. But even this was not to last. In 1982, the International Whaling Commission declared a moratorium on commercial whaling to take effect from March 1988. Whaling is now a thing of the past.

Precious resource

There are significant differences between Western whaling practices and those of Japan. For one thing, whaling in Japan was always more than a commercial venture, it was a whole culture unto itself encompassing close cooperation and sharing. For another, while Western whalers sought large whales solely for their oil, the Japanese hunted the smaller species and used every part of the animal. Whales were traditionally regarded as a precious resource not to be wasted.

The Japanese, of course, used the oil, but they also ate the meat and some of the internal organs. Other internal organs provided an important ingredient in the manufacture of certain vitamins and other

medicines. Whale tissues were boiled to produce gelatin, bones and teeth were transformed into a wide variety of finely crafted items, and oil residue was used for fertilizer. Probably no other people has so thoroughly made use of a natural resource.

In an attempt to alleviate the severe food shortages of the immediate postwar period, permission was granted by the Occupation forces in 1951 for the Japanese to send a whaling fleet to the Antarctic. The whales taken in subsequent excursions proved a valuable source of protein for the Japanese people. Whale meat was regularly served in school lunches for a long time. When I was a university student in Tokyo in the 1960s, there were only three dishes to choose from in the school cafeteria: meatless curry, *tofu*

with rice and *miso* soup, and whale cutlet. For four years I ate one or the other of these dishes for lunch almost daily. Whale meat was the cheapest meat available back then and my mother often served it at home, too.

The Japanese whaling industry may no longer exist, but the people of Taiji are determined to preserve its long history and culture. To this end they have built a number of facilities well worth visiting. One is the Whale Museum built in 1969, which is the largest museum of its kind in the world. Here one can learn just about all there is to know about whales and see some 1,000 items related to Japan's 700-year whaling history.

On the beach right near the museum, a catcher boat, the *Kyo-maru No. 11*, which was once used in Japan's Antarctic whaling, is kept on display. The craft measures 63.5 meters long, weighs 696 tons, and carried a crew of 26. Standing behind the harpoon gun installed at the bow of the ship one can almost taste the cold, salty air of the Antarctic Ocean and see the whales passing before the ship.

Leaps and twirls

A small inlet on the other side of the museum has been sectioned off into a number of pools, home to several small species of lesser whales. In one pool,



The Whale Museum in Taiji, the largest of its kind in the world.

there are three bottlenosed dolphins, two Pacific white-sided dolphins, one pilot whale and one orca. Several times a day these lesser whales put on a show for visitors to the museum.

As I watch the dolphins leap and twirl to gasps of surprise and delighted applause from the audience, I notice a lone figure leaning against the railing on the far side of one of the pools. I assume him to be one of the trainers, but find out later that he is Yukihiro Kirimoto, a young man enthralled by the sleek ocean animals. His primary interest is not the tamed whales, but seven wild dolphins kept for breeding purposes. These are dolphins that were caught in coastal tuna fishing nets and later sold to the town, he explains to me. "The dolphins are very smart. They've

gotten to know me, I guess from my smell and voice, and I can spend a full couple of hours playing with them. They swim right alongside me as I run or walk, but they are also quickly bored if I keep doing the same thing. They don't pay much attention to me if I come every day, but if I come only once a week or so, they act happy to see me and seem to be inviting me into the water.

"The trained dolphins work well together in pairs, but if there are three, one is always slightly behind the others. Perhaps because they undergo more stress, the trained dolphins have a higher death rate. They're very sensitive animals. One trained dolphin got sick and wasn't able to perform for a long while. It never regained its former skill even after it got well,

and very soon after that it died, apparently from depression.

"They love company. They love people to come into the water and play with them. Natural pools like this are the best way to keep them in a situation as close to their natural habitat as possible."

Taiji's whaling days are over, but that is not to say it does not have a future. All of Taiji could, after all, become a great marine park where humans and whales could get better acquainted. We could become friends, I think, the way the youth by the dolphin pool has become close to the dolphins.

Ritsuko Misu
Editorial Manager

Journal of Japanese Trade & Industry

Table Talk

Sapporo Lion at Ginza 7-chome

Big cities in every country have a great variety of eating and drinking spots, ranging from ultra-high-class restaurants catering to highbrows to pubs for young people. Tokyo is no exception. There is every kind of spot to satisfy people in all walks of life.

I introduce here one spot suited to all kinds of people, both young and old, men and women, where they can let their hair down and enjoy themselves. This is the Sapporo Lion beer hall at Ginza 7-chome, operated directly by Sapporo Breweries Ltd. and boasting a long history and tradition. (In other places, there are Sapporo Lion beer hall chains.)

The Sapporo Lion at Ginza 7-chome is located on the ground floor of a six-story building constructed in 1934. Lion's walls are decorated with 10-faced mosaic glass which is said to have taken three years to make. The counter in front is made of

marble imported from Germany. This beer hall serves mostly beverages made by Sapporo Breweries and shipped directly from its plants, but it also serves British, American, German and Belgian beers, as well as Scotch whisky and German and French wine.

Sausages go best with beer. In addition to a great variety of sausages, Sapporo Lion's offerings include baked oysters and spareribs. It also serves light dinner dishes, such as Norwegian salmon steak, beef cooked in beer, and paella.

Thankfully, Sapporo Lion is open every day. On Sundays and national holidays, it serves holiday dishes and brunch sets until early evening. It is conveniently lo-

cated on the main street of Ginza. Its prices for food and drinks are reasonable. Customers can enjoy themselves without worrying about the bill.

Main items on the menu: Draft beer (king-size glass) ¥1,600, (small glass) ¥500; Wiener sausages ¥700; Smoked sausages ¥850; Baked oysters ¥950; Spareribs ¥1,000; Mixed pizza pie ¥980; Paella ¥1,480.

(Yoshimichi Hori, editor-in-chief)

Address: Ginza Lion Bldg.
9-20, Ginza 7-chome, Chuo-ku
Tel: (03) 3571-2590
Open every day from 11:30 a.m. to 11 p.m.

