

Wakayama Prefecture Official View on Dolphin Fishery at Taiji

1. Why does Wakayama Prefectural Government permit dolphin fishery?

For the southern part of the prefecture, dolphin fishery is not only an important industry but also a local traditional culture, and it is conducted in a manner permitted by relevant laws so as to enable scientific management and utilization of natural resources.

Taiji, located on the east coast of the Kii Peninsula, is a small town with a population of 3,500. Located far away from major centers of economic activity, the town has a 400-year tradition of whaling, and has flourished over the years thanks to whaling and dolphin fishery. Whales and dolphins are an integral part of the food culture of the area. There are many traditional cultural events throughout the year connected with whales and dolphins, and dolphin fishery has supported the livelihood of people as the industry indispensable to the local economy.

We believe that whales and dolphins are living marine resources which can be harvested in a sustainable manner with proper management. The relevant authorities control fishing activities in order not to deplete these resources excessively. As for large-size cetaceans, the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling took effect among many countries in 1948. The purpose of the convention is to protect living resources from extinction, and it actually assumes these cetaceans to be captured for use. However, even after populations of some cetacean species increased considerably and the theory that these species were threatening other fishery resources became dominant, the International Whaling Commission unreasonably refused to permit the resumption of commercial whaling. That is why Japan withdrew from this convention. Since 2019, Japan has conducted commercial whaling under the domestic law only in coastal waters of Japan. On the other hand, small-size cetaceans such as dolphins are not even covered by the above convention. Fishery of these cetaceans is conducted under the fishery resource jurisdiction of each country. In Japan, it is conducted under the supervision of prefectural governments according to the legal regulations of the Fisheries Agency. Of course, we believe that the regulations of the Fisheries Agency are fully based on scientific findings so that the fishery will not endanger the sustainability of small-size cetaceans.

Prefectural governments control dolphin fishery according to these regulations of the Fisheries Agency. As one of these prefectural governments, we have no choice but to permit dolphin fishery unless there is any obvious fact that violates the regulations.

2. Dolphin fishery is cruel. The governor should exercise his authority to stop it.

Under Article 57, paragraph (1) of the Fishery Act, a person who intends to operate a fishery, such as drive hunting of cetaceans, spearfishing of dolphins, which is specified by prefectural rules for fisheries adjustment (hereinafter referred to as “rules”) other than fisheries permitted by the Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries shall obtain a permission of the governor concerned. Basically, fisheries adjustment is to be dealt with by the national government. However, the authority to establish rules is delegated to the governors upon the approval of the national government (item (1) statutory entrusted function).

If an application for fishery permission is filed to the governor, the provisions of fishery permitted by the minister (Article 40, paragraph (1) of the Fishery Act) shall legally apply mutatis mutandis with respect to standards for rejecting the application. Therefore, the permission should be granted unless it is applicable to the following cases.

Article 40, paragraph (1) of the Fishery Act (Cases where permission is not made)

- If the applicant is not a qualified person
- If permissions of the same fishery as that pertaining to the application may be unduly concentrated

Meanwhile, as provided by the Fishery Act and the Order for Enforcement of the Fishery Act, “cases specified by other rules” are included as cases where fishery permission is not granted by the governor. This could lead to the claim that there is still room for the governor’s discretion.

However, rules are invalid unless they are approved by the national government according to the approval standards specified under Article 250-2, paragraph (1) of the Local Autonomy Act.

Examples of approval standards of the national government

- Rules are recognized not to deter proper development of fishery productivity
- Rules do not include provisions that are deemed to unreasonably impose obligations or restrict rights

The discretionary power should be exercised in accordance with the above approval standards of the national government. In addition, the aspect of fisheries adjustment, which is the purpose of the Fishery Act and the rules, should also be considered. It is illegal to exercise or abuse the discretionary power beyond its scope in terms of the necessity of fisheries adjustment.

For the above reasons, proper applications for permission of drive hunting of cetaceans or spearfishing of dolphins cannot be rejected at the governor's discretion.

3. Why does Wakayama Prefecture continue whaling when Western countries have ceased whaling?

Primarily, the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling took effect in 1948 for the purpose of proper resource management for large-size cetaceans whose stocks had decreased due to large-scale whaling by Western countries, which ceased whaling and now take an anti-whaling position. Meanwhile, fishery of small-size cetaceans such as dolphins is controlled under the jurisdiction of each country.

Accordingly, the Fishery Act and ministerial ordinances in Japan specify conditions on fishery of small-size cetaceans, including species that can be captured, so that their sustainability as living resources will not be endangered. In compliance with these legal proceedings, Wakayama Prefectural Government specifies rules on fishery of small-size cetaceans such as dolphins. Fishermen in Taiji or other areas in the prefecture are catching dolphins and other small-size cetaceans following these rules.

Taking this into consideration, the following are some reasons why Wakayama Prefectural Government keeps permitting these whaling and dolphin fishery.

(1) Like beef, pork and chicken, whale and dolphin meat is commonly eaten and in demand accordingly. Fishing them to meet the demand is not different in nature from other economic activities. Conversely, we should not threaten the livelihood of the stakeholders by arbitrary legal administration based on a specific concept that eating and killing cetaceans is evil.

(2) People in the southern part of Wakayama Prefecture have traditionally engaged in whaling under severe living and economic environment to maintain their livelihood and support their family members and community, though which their unique culture has been nurtured. As designated as the Japan Heritage, their tradition and culture should be highly respected.

(3) In the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling, aboriginal peoples in the U.S. and other countries are allowed to conduct traditional whaling of even large-size cetaceans based on the provision of aboriginal subsistence whaling. If this is acceptable, it is unreasonable that only Taiji fishermen, who continue traditional whaling just like these aboriginal peoples, are criticized and attacked.

4. Is Japan the only country to hunt whales and dolphins?

Both whales and dolphins are cetaceans. Generally speaking, we call a cetacean which grows to over 4 meters in length a whale, and one that grows to less than 4 meters in length a dolphin. The International Whaling Committee (IWC) controls great whales, but does not regulate the capture of dolphins and other smaller cetaceans.

There is an exemption for great whale whaling by indigenous people in order to protect their livelihood, under which the U.S. and Russia are permitted to capture 196 great whales in total, Denmark is permitted to capture 215 whales, and Saint Vincent is permitted to capture 4 whales.

Norway and Iceland lodged protests with the IWC and continue commercial whaling.

In 2018, Norway captured 454 whales and Iceland captured 152 whales.

Japan used to capture whales for research purposes in accordance with Article 8 of the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling. Since its withdrawal from the IWC in the end of June 2019, Japan resumed commercial whaling within its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) under careful management of resources and captured 307 animals in 2020.

Fishing of dolphins and small cetaceans is not regulated by the IWC, but is self-regulated by each county in order to avoid resource depletion. In 2019, Japan captured 1,887 animals, of which Wakayama Prefecture captured 998 animals.

Whaling and dolphin fishery are conducted in many regions all over the world. Neither Japan, nor Taiji Town, is the only country or region which have whaling and dolphin fishery.

5. The American film “The Cove”

Wakayama Prefecture believes that the issue of dolphin fishing is a very complex one. Dolphin and whale fishing are not limited only to Japan, with many other areas in the world also participating, in many cases sharing similar geographical conditions, and similar cultural, historical, and economic motivations. Despite this, “The Cove” was a somewhat sensationalist, and very one-sided presentation of the situation in Wakayama, seen only from the view of animal protectionism.

There are a number of issues raised by the film.

Many people all over the world eat meat, and in order to do so, the lives of animals, whether wild or carefully-raised domesticated animals, have to be taken. The killing of animals for food is normally conducted out of sight in abattoirs, and it would be relatively easy to sensationalise the slaughter of any animal, by filming inside such abattoirs, for example. “The Cove” secretly filmed the scenes of dying dolphins, and depicted their deaths in a manner designed to excite outrage. (In fact, the situation has been improved as dolphin meat has now been processed inside a building.)

We believe that the film overstates mercury contamination by stating that dolphin meat contains 2,000 ppm of mercury. This concentration differs greatly from the actual data. The film also includes a number of statements that distort the facts. The claim is made that “dolphin meat is sold as whale meat to cover up the mercury contamination”, that “the Japanese people do not know that they are actually eating dolphin meat because of a media cover-up”, and “Japan’s affirmation that it will continue whaling and dolphin fishery can be traced back to historical Japanese imperialism.”

The Taiji dolphin fishermen have been the target of repeated psychological harassment and interference by aggressive animal protection organizations from overseas. Taiji dolphin fishermen are conducting their fishing activity in compliance with Japanese law, following traditional methods under the supervision of both the national and the prefectural governments. We believe that it is unfair to target the fishermen themselves, since they are only following the law.

We believe that it is inexcusable to criticize the Taiji dolphin fishermen based on incorrect information and one-sided moral standards with which Japanese people do not necessarily agree. Such criticisms are an unfair threat to the fishermen’s right to earn their living and are a slight on the history and pride of the town.

6. Dolphins have been sold to aquariums for the purpose of moneymaking. It is cruel to keep them in small tanks. It should be stopped.

In this world, everyone has their own ideas. Some people prefer to keep wild animals wild and claim that animals should not be kept in zoos and aquariums because it restricts animals' freedom.

In fact, it has been reported that animals kept in some inappropriately managed zoos, etc. had to live in the poor environment without being fed enough. Many people worry about such situations. In most cases, however, in zoos and aquariums in Japan and across the world, animals have been well taken care of by their dedicated staff. Also, visitors can see animals up close and observe their behaviors. From such experiences, some people learn the significance of wild animals, get interested in animals and nature, raise awareness about proper conservation of them. If there were no zoos and aquariums, they would not have opportunities to gain such insights. In that sense, zoos and aquariums have played important roles both socially and educationally.

Moreover, zoos and aquariums assume academic missions such as efforts to ensure continuation of rare species through conservation and breeding works, research to understand characteristics and habits of animals and so on. Denial of animal exhibitions in zoos and aquariums means the refusal/rejection of such important roles borne by zoos and aquariums.

Actually, there are demands for live dolphins from zoos and aquariums. As long as demands exists, it is totally unacceptable to criticize fishermen who are trying to meet the demands or to force them to stop what they do.

7. Killing dolphins and eating their meat should not be called “Tradition” or “Culture”?

Japan is surrounded by oceans, and marine resources have been a significant source of protein for the people of Japan from ancient times. Whales and dolphins are one part of such resources, and it has been established that the prehistoric Jomon people began to utilize them a food source thousands of years ago.

The southern part of Wakayama prefecture is very mountainous and therefore has little arable land. As a result, it was natural for the local residents to take whales and dolphins which come close to the coast, and utilize them as food. In Japan, we utilize all parts of the whale, not only the meat as food but also other parts of the animal as the raw materials to make craft products. Whaling in Japan has differed from that of some other countries which, until petroleum came into use, killed an enormous number of whales solely to obtain whale oil, throwing the meat away into the ocean.

Whaling and dolphin fishery at Taiji became an important industry, provided the local people with their livelihood, and then were integrated into their culture. It is a natural response to the severe environment in which the local people lived. In gratitude for the blessings of nature, Taiji people continue the custom of holding memorial services for the whales and dolphins that are killed. Farmers in Japan who raise livestock to later kill and eat them also feel a sense of guilt about killing their livestock, and eat the meat while giving thanks to nature.

Criticizing these activities or inflaming such criticism through incorrect information is just imposing one-sided value judgments on others.

8. Japan is one of the major economic powers. Surely the Japanese can live without eating whales and dolphins?

Whale and dolphin meat, both fresh and preserved, was a precious source of protein in Japan for the residents of remote islands, peninsulas, and villages located deep in the mountains far from the centers of economic activity. Even now, there are regions across Japan where whale and dolphin meat is a significant part of traditional cuisine, and many people who used to eat such meat in their childhood enjoy the taste, and wish to buy and consume it.

It is quite rare to find whale and dolphin meat in the markets but it is a fact that there is still demand for it. Why should someone try to ban people from eating whale or dolphin meat simply because there are other kinds of food available? It is up to individuals to decide what to eat, thus what to buy. The fishermen catching whales and dolphins are making their livelihood by responding to this demand. Forcing these fishermen to stop their whaling and dolphin fishery is the same as telling them to abandon their livelihood.

9. Does dolphin fishery damage both the image and the national interest of Japan?

Food culture and habits in different countries are a response to a number of factors such as the climate, geography, history and religion of a region. Mutual respect, therefore, is critical. For instance, some religions strictly prohibit their believers from eating certain foods. They, however, do not denounce non-believers for eating such kinds of food simply because they themselves are not allowed to eat them. Dietary culture is a distinctive feature of each country, and surely no one country has the right to decide which dietary cultures are right and which are barbaric, especially if the impact on food stocks is carefully managed. We do not believe that refusing to respond to the unilateral imposition of the cultural values of these groups of activists who claims it is not allowed to whales and dolphins damages the national interest of Japan. Furthermore, it is shameful for a citizen of a sovereign nation to have an idea that we must follow Western countries which are against whaling, isn't it?

10. Dolphins are intelligent animals and friendly to people. Why do Japanese people eat them?

People take the lives of living things in order to survive. We kill the livestock which we carefully raised by stockbreeding, harvest vegetables which we carefully grow and eat them.

In Japan, before eating, we put our hands together saying the word “Itadakimasu,” to express our gratitude for the life that has been given to allow us to survive. We do the same not only for dolphins but also for cows, pigs, fish, grains and vegetables. Speaking about animals, not only dolphins but also other animals including livestock such as cows and pigs display emotion and intelligence, and all of these animals have the same right to live that we have. In order to eat meat however, we have to kill these animals. We do not understand why someone can say which animals are acceptable to eat and which are not.

11. Is dolphin meat safe to eat given high levels of mercury?

Mercury is a metal which exists widely in nature. Some of the mercury contained in seawater is absorbed by micro-organisms which are eaten by small fish, which are then eaten by larger fish. As we go higher in the food chain, mercury will tend to accumulate in the largest fish or sea mammals including dolphins. Studies show that dolphins, which are higher in the food chain, do contain higher levels of mercury when compared with other fish and shellfish.

We know that the amount of mercury in a dolphin is insufficient to cause acute poisoning (sudden illness developed within a few days after ingestion). Research has not yet found all of the long-term health effects of regularly eating dolphin and whale meat. However, given that mercury is also excreted from the body, the impact on health over time is not considered significant in the context of a balanced diet. Indeed, our health survey in Taiji, where people eat quite large amounts of dolphin meat, showed that mercury did not have an impact on the health of local people regardless of their age.

Mercury can pass through the human placenta and could possibly affect the development of the nervous system of a baby in the womb, although the effects are not so serious as to harm the child's social ability. Nevertheless, in November 2005, the national government revised the "Advice for Pregnant Women on Fish Consumption and Mercury". The revised regulation stipulates that the maximum level of mercury intake for a pregnant woman should be 2.0 micrograms per week per one kilogram of body weight. This figure means a pregnant woman can eat 80 grams of bottlenose dolphin meat once every two months.

Since Wakayama Prefecture contains regions such as Taiji, where people consume large amounts of whale and dolphin meat, classes for mothers (health guidance for pregnant women) run by municipalities advise them to avoid consuming too much of fishery products which contain high levels of mercury, while encouraging them to eat a well-balanced diet of sea food.

As long as excessive consumption is avoided as described above, it is completely safe to eat dolphin meat. It is obvious from the health conditions of people in Taiji.

12. Is there a possibility that consuming dolphin meat could cause Minamata disease?

Minamata disease was caused by repeated consumption of fishery products which were contaminated by industrial waste containing very high levels of mercury.

Obviously there are no health risks from repeated consumption of fishery products which contain naturally delivered mercury, if the amount is within the acceptable limit of intake of mercury levels, and even for fish products which contain higher levels of naturally absorbed mercury, it is still possible to eat these fish safely if the frequency of consumption is controlled, given that the human body excretes half the amount of mercury consumed over the period of approximately 70 days.

Up to the present date, there have been no reports that naturally delivered mercury taken into the human body through sea food has caused damage to human health. In fact, there have been no cases of mercury poisoning either now or historically in Taiji, where, in addition to fishing for commercial gain, the people also used to eat a much larger amount of dolphin meat than nowadays.

13. Is dolphin meat sold with misleading labeling?

There have been no cases so far of incorrect labeling of dolphin meat as whale meat. If the authorities were to obtain detailed information of such infractions of the law, we would conduct the necessary research in cooperation with both the national government and related municipalities.

If we were to find such cases, the offending businesses would be subject to regulatory guidance in accordance with the Food Labeling Act and be required to adhere to proper labeling practices.

14. Is the method of dolphin fishery conducted in Taiji Town inhuman?

In the past, dolphin drive fishing conducted in Taiji Town used harpoons to kill the dolphins after the dolphins were driven into coves as shown in the film “The Cove”.

However, after December 2008, the killing method was changed to the method used in the Faroe Islands in Denmark, in order to reduce the time that dolphins take to die. The period of time has been reduced to around 10 seconds, a reduction of over 95%. The wound site is much smaller and the amount of bleeding is negligible.

Moreover, since December 2008, in the same way that livestock is slaughtered in special facilities out of sight, the preparation of dolphin meat has been moved out of sight to a new hygienic facility in the Taiji Fishing Port.

As described above, many of the issues raised in the film “The Cove” have been addressed.