Wakayama Prefecture Official’ View on Dolphin Fishery at Taiji.

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. 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 fisheries 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.
Why does Wakayama Prefectural Government permit dolphin fishery?

For the southern part of the prefecture, dolphin fishery is an important traditional industry, based on the 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. Whale 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 the industry is indispensable to the local economy.

The relevant authorities control fishing activities in order not to deplete natural resources excessively. We believe that whales and dolphins are a marine resource which can be harvested in a sustainable manner with proper management. The Japanese government carries out scientific research, and sets quotas every year by species, limiting the quotas to only those stocks where populations are judged sufficient. Overfishing would lead to depletion of precious resources or even the endangerment of the species. Accordingly, dolphin fishery is conducted based on scientific information provided by resource abundance surveys, and capture permits are granted to the extent that they do not represent any risk to stocks from the standpoint of resource conservation.
**Why does Wakayama Prefecture continue whaling when Europe and America have ceased whaling?**

Starting in the 1960s, the major whaling countries in Europe and America began to withdraw from the whaling industry not only because of depleted stocks but also because it was becoming unprofitable. In 1972, the UN Conference on the Human Environment decided to adopt a 10-year moratorium on commercial whaling, and there was a steady increase in the number of anti-whaling countries joining the International Whaling Commission (IWC). In 1982, the IWC adopted a temporary suspension of commercial whaling for 13 species of whales including large-size baleen whales. As a then-member of the IWC, Japan also ceased commercial whaling in 1986, but resumed it in 2019.

We do not believe that eating beef or pork is somehow different from whale or dolphin meat and reject the implication that whale and dolphin meat are in some sense special, and should not be utilized as a food resource. There are also other countries and regions in the world where people make a living by whaling, and in which whale meat is an invaluable source of protein.

The results of Japan’s whaling for research purposes conducted in accordance with Article 8 of the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling showed that marine resources such as minke whales had increased and abundant cetacean resources could be utilized as food. Therefore, in July 2019, Japan resumed commercial whaling of minke whales, Bryde's whales and sei whales among large-size whales within its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) under careful management of resources.

The IWC has no jurisdiction over small-size cetaceans such as dolphins, and each country is responsible for the management of these resources. Japan also controls the available number of small-size cetaceans for each species based on scientific surveys and permits their capture in numbers that do not affect the abundance of these resources.
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 as 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 using 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 are a natural response to the severe environment in which the local people live, and is an important industry, integrated into their culture, and providing the local people with their livelihood. 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 and inflaming the public through incorrect information is just imposing one-sided value judgments on others.
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, were 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 are 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. Why should someone try to ban these people from eating whale or dolphin meat simply because there are other kinds of food available?

It is quite rare to find whale and dolphin meat in the markets but it is a fact that there is still demand. The fishermen who make their livelihood from catching whales and dolphins are responding to this demand. Forcing these fishermen to stop their whaling and dolphin fishery is the same as telling them to abandon their livelihoods.
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 damages the national interest of Japan.
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. People in the West rely on stockbreeding, and kill the livestock which they have carefully raised and eat the meat. 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. 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 be able to eat meat, however, we have to kill these animals. We do not understand the basis of this distinction as to what animals are acceptable to eat and which are not, so long as the fishermen who hunt dolphins to make a living strictly adhere to the regulations which stipulate the species and the number of dolphins they can hunt.
**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 determined 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, there have been no cases over time of mercury poisoning in Taiji, where people eat quite large amounts of dolphin meat.

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.
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.
**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 JAS (Act for Standardization and Proper Labeling of Agricultural and Forestry Products) and be required to adhere to proper labeling practices.
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. Many of the issues raised in the film “The Cove” have been addressed.
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 US is permitted to capture 55 great whales, the Russia is permitted to capture 125 great whales, Denmark is permitted to capture 207 whales, and Saint Vincent is permitted to capture 46 whales. Norway and Iceland lodged protests with the IWC and continue commercial whaling.
In 2016, Norway captured 591 whales and Iceland captured 46 whales.
Japan used to capture up to 1,180 animals per year 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.
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 2016, Japan captured 2,246 animals, down from 2,637 in 2015 of which Wakayama Prefecture captured 981 animals in 2016 and 1,014 animals in 2015.
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.