

End this slaughter on the high seas



US campaigns officer for the Chippenham-based Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society, explains why it is important to make a stand



Cruel carnage: One of the Japanese whaling fleet with a whale it has harpooned in the Southern Ocean

AS a result of recent press reports which have highlighted the efforts of international celebrities to thwart the annual hunts of small whales and dolphins in Japan, there is a renewed interest in the dolphin drive hunts that occur annually near the coastal village of Taiji.

In fact, these hunts were first acknowledged by the media in the 1970s when activists and filmmakers shared the carnage with the world. Although only a part of Japan's larger hunts that kill up to 20,000 small whales and dolphins annually, the drive hunts are particularly controversial, if only because they can be witnessed near the shore.

Dolphins are corralled by boats and driven, sometimes by their hundreds, into shallow water where they are killed for their meat, or as part of pest control programmes responding to claims that they compete with fishermen. A growing number are selected alive for sale to marine parks, a lucrative incentive to continue these hunts.

This hunt, although conducted by only a dozen or so fishing boats, is one of the largest drive hunts in the world.

Has this international exposure and sporadic media attention done anything to encourage an end to these hunts? Or has it driven the fishermen to be more defiant than ever, now covering their cruel acts behind tarpaulins? Why are just a few fishermen in Japan still killing dolphins, when the rest of the world cherishes them?

I have been to Taiji, and have

been confronted by the same fishermen and authorities who met these celebrities.

The problems in Taiji are complex. What appeared to be a practice in decline, conducted in only a few coastal towns in Japan, has been revived by the demand for live dolphins for marine parks in Japan and elsewhere.

Recently, dolphins from the Taiji hunt were slated to be exported to the Dominican Republic for a swim-with-the-dolphins programme.

Because Taiji is one of the birthplaces of whaling, it is steeped in the politics of whaling, and the drive hunts are just a piece of this larger psychological and political drama. From what we know about the politics of whaling, it is not the fishermen that we have to convince. The fishermen, of course have a vested interest, but they do what the central government tells them.

And it is probably not about the people of Japan not being inspired and amazed by whales and dolphins. Stories of divers and surfers, and even fishermen, in Japan pushing stranded whales back to sea have surfaced in the press over the years. Whale and dolphin watching is popular in Japan, as it is all over the world.

The government of Japan understands that most of the world does not want whales to be killed, whether for "research" or the dinner plate. A few communities worldwide rely on whale meat for subsistence and

survival, but beyond these borders, the world wants whales and dolphins to be protected.

It is no secret how we feel about the issue, and our position is backed by the science, which tells us that dolphins are self-aware, like we are, and they have social lives and relationships, with research revealing distinct cultures in some species, and sophisticated societies in most.

But does the Japanese government know how the people of Japan feel about this issue, and if so, are they ignoring the voices coming from within?

We know that the younger generations are not interested in eating whale meat, to the point where the government is actually reintroducing whale meat into school lunch programmes to try to stimulate a dying national appetite for them.

We also know that there is a real health risk in consuming some whale and dolphin meat that is contaminated with mercury and other pollutants.

ADDITIONALLY, the coverage of the hunts and the increasing objections to them is starting to make its way into the Japanese language national newspapers.

So what can we do? We can reach those in Japan who do not know about the hunts, and support those who question the hunts. The Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society continues

to be involved in educational efforts in Japan where there is a great void in the understanding of what whales and dolphins are biologically and the role they play in the ecosystem.

We must continue to shed light upon practices that when exposed to modern day standards of welfare and conservation, don't make any sense, either ethically or economically. The complexities of political stubbornness have in this case overshadowed the stark simplicity of brutality involved.

The only thing that may stop Japan killing whales and dolphins is the realisation and acknowledgment that its people no longer want these practices to continue. The tide will turn when the Japanese policy-makers face the full force of international pressure and also look inward to what the people of Japan want and need for the 21st century. And the change must happen in Tokyo, not just in Taiji. Bearing witness to and exposing these hunts is an important part of this process.

There is something you can do. Contact the authorities in Japan, and your local Japanese embassy. Tell them that you oppose the drive hunts. You can send a message to the Prime Minister of Japan, Yasuo Fukuda, via his website www.kantei.go.jp

Do not attend marine parks that maintain dolphins in captivity. Most of these dolphins have been captured from the wild, often through inhumane methods, such as the drive hunt.

And finally, you can write to the zoo and aquarium associations opposing the procurement of live whales and dolphins from the drive hunts. To obtain further information, you can visit www.drivenbydemand.org



What do you think? Should Britain protest to Japan over whale-hunting?

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