

Japanese activists fight against the tide to save whales and dolphins

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It's tough being a Japanese activist — especially if you are campaigning against whaling or dolphin hunting. Just ask Takayo Yamaguchi, subjected to online abuse, death threats and hacking attacks since she pioneered “tweetstorm” dolphin defense campaigns on social media in Japan six months ago. Or veteran conservationist Sakae Hemmi, cofounder of ELSA Nature Conservancy in 1976, who has been questioned several times by police since she first became involved in activism against the dolphin hunts in Taiji, Wakayama Prefecture. Or Junichi Sato and Toru Suzuki, two Greenpeace Japan activists convicted of trespass and theft in 2010 after seizing a parcel of whale meat illicitly posted by a Japan scientific whaling employee, which they presented as evidence to prove allegations of embezzlement within the scientific whaling program.

Often unaware of these activists' work, foreign opponents of Japan's whaling and dolphin hunting wonder why there are so few Japanese critics. Something needs to be said about the obstacles Japanese activists face. First of all, it's difficult to resist the nationalism surrounding cetacean hunting, upheld by a mixed crowd of Fisheries Agency bureaucrats, politicians, journalists, academics and Net *uyo* (social media-based rightists). Even Japan Communist Party politicians have called for the protection of Japan's whaling

traditions and culinary culture. As Hemmi emphasized to me, in Japan whaling and dolphin hunting are “legal fisheries.” And the fishery business has existential and cultural importance; it’s considered essential to Japan’s food security and culinary identity, defined in part as a *gyoshokubunka* (marine food culture).

Accumulated resentment against decades of foreign criticism; a conviction that foreign activists and governments are threatening a key, if largely symbolic stronghold in Japanese fisheries (“once whaling falls, tuna fisheries will be next!”); and the politics of Japan’s scientific whaling boondoggle are all behind a deep “them and us” mentality promoted by Fisheries bureaucrats, politicians and pundits. It’s characterized by strident assertions of cultural difference, complaints of cultural imperialism and liberal helpings of the “eco-terrorism” slur.

The sometimes extreme tactics of foreign activist organizations and the racism of some foreign critics feed this defensive self-definition. Most Japanese rarely eat whale or dolphin meat, but they are sympathetic to complaints about arrogant foreigners trying to impose their values upon Japan.

These confrontations make life difficult for Japanese activists. Hemmi told me they “have to be very careful not to be mistaken for having a connection with Sea Shepherd,” the militant anti-whaling group founded by activist Paul Watson that hounds Japanese whaling vessels in the Southern Seas. Yamaguchi says other Japanese ask her why she doesn’t “protect Japanese from attacks by foreign activists.” She adds that “insulting the entire Japanese

public (over the dolphin drive hunt in the cove in Taiji) is creating sympathy for Taiji fishermen.” Another veteran conservationist expressed dismay at how the behavior of foreign activists has provided excuses “for the government to shut us out of talks with officials,” undermining years of patient lobbying in coalition with other conservation organizations.

Japanese activists are hardly alone in facing home-crowd animosity. Even in an anti-whaling stronghold like Australia, environmentalist and animal rights organizations are often accused of being “un-Australian” and “extremist” by powerful mining and livestock farming interests. Yet they can push back against critics in the court of public opinion, because — unlike many of their Japanese counterparts — they are often big, well-financed, well-connected NPOs.

Large donation-paying memberships and big budgets permit the hiring of numerous professional staff specializing in recruiting, lobbying and advocacy; and through these activities, such organizations can acquire credibility and leverage with politicians, industry groups, celebrities and the mass media. Expensive media-savvy campaigns allow them to influence public opinion directly.

Greenpeace Australia had 45,000 paying members in 2013, 70 full- and part-time employees and a budget of 17 million Australian dollars (¥1.5 trillion). Animals Australia, a top animal-welfare umbrella organization, claims 20,000 members, 22 full- and part-time staff and an annual budget of AU\$3 million (¥278 million) in 2013.

Japan's environmentalist and animal welfare organizations are proportionately smaller. Greenpeace Japan in 2013 had 5,000 members, 31 full- and part-time staff and a budget of ¥195 million. In the same year, the Nature Conservation Society of Japan had 25 full-time staff, 15,000 members and a budget of ¥254 million. Organizations working on campaigns against cetacean hunting are often far smaller, with one or two full-time staffers, or just a few volunteers. Then there are individuals like Yamaguchi, who works with the international Save the Blood Dolphins campaign to raise awareness of captive dolphins' plight.

Why the disparity in scale and influence? Political scientists studying Japan's NPO sector often invoke the Edo Period Confucian slogan "*Kanson minpi*" — "Revere officials and look down on the masses" — to explain the statist ideology of modern Japanese governance, which limited NPO growth until recent times. Originating in the late 19th century and adopted from European models, this ideology put the state firmly in charge of Japan's catch-up modernization: An elite educated bureaucracy decided economic and social goals, while industry and especially the public were expected to remain in the passenger seats. There — to paraphrase philosopher Masao Maruyama — people could easily "doze off over their rights". Japanese statism achieved its complete form in the post-1945 era.

This statism traditionally admitted limited space for civil society groups, as political scientists like Keiko Hirata and Robert Pekannen have explained; they are ideally small, localized and cooperative with government. Activist groups don't fit that formula easily. Though environmental movements developed in the 1960s and '70s, they focused

on “single-issue” causes and their appeal faded as most Japanese accepted government priorities on economic growth and increasing affluence.

After the 1995 Kobe earthquake, however, there was an upsurge in public support for volunteerism, just when faith in bureaucratic competence was also falling. Public pressure led to passage of an NPO law in 1998 that substantially lowered the financial requirements for NPO registration, established wide criteria for organizations to register under and streamlined their bureaucratic supervision.

Since the March 11, 2011, Tohoku disasters, registered volunteer NPOs have really come into their own (including one that this author co-directs). However, activist organizations still face statist prejudices and bureaucratic bias, especially when they are involved with push-button nationalist issues such as whaling and dolphin hunting — as Greenpeace Japan found, to its cost.

Many such organizations avoid NPO registration, in spite of the fund-raising status, enhanced prestige and (sometimes) tax deductibility it confers. Since 2010 Greenpeace Japan has been registered as a “general incorporated association.” This, Junichi Sato told me, is a “legal status with much more flexibility,” which also satisfies Greenpeace’s desire “to be independent from influences of authority.”

Hemmi said that ELSA didn’t apply for NPO registration because it didn’t want to be subjected to bureaucratic regulation. Other activists said that registration was too much trouble, or that Japanese groups campaigning against cetacean hunts are often too small and divided by factional rivalry to qualify for NPO registration anyway.

Skeptical readers might think that there is nothing wrong with this state of affairs. Large, cashed-up advocacy NPOs can have a distorting influence on government policy out of all proportion to their membership bases. After all, America's National Rifle Association is also an NPO! And if Japanese anti-whaling and anti-dolphin hunting activists can't change the minds of their fellow Japanese, then so be it.

There is another view, however, which sees activist organizations as a potentially powerful but loyal opposition, countering the outsized influence of the Japan Fisheries Agency and whaling nationalism in shaping policy, diplomacy and public opinion about whaling, dolphin hunting and fisheries.

In such a role, these groups could bring to the Japanese public's notice problems with transparency, waste and scientific credibility in the "research whaling" program, air questions about mercury contamination in cetacean meat and promote economic alternatives for the declining fishing towns involved in whaling and dolphin hunting.

Most of all, they could mobilize the public to push the Japan Fisheries Agency and its political allies away from whaling nationalism and toward pro-active commitment to fisheries conservation, at home and on the high seas, in collaboration with other governments and NPOs.

"To me, protecting dolphins means protecting the ocean, and protecting the ocean means protecting us," says Yamaguchi, summing up her holistic vision. "It's not only because dolphins are pretty".

To achieve those goals, and to get themselves heard above the confrontations between the Japanese government and foreign activist organizations, Japanese activist groups will need to pull together and acquire more finances, size and domestic and international influence. For their part, foreign activists should ease off the confrontation tactics and provide more resources, advice and moral support to Japanese activists instead.

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