

# JAPAN REPORT

November 2019

TAF visited Japan in November 2019, to gain insight in the country's:

- environmental issues, such as plastic consumption and overfishing
- the dolphin hunt in Taiji.

## PLASTIC CONSUMPTION

### Culture and plastic

- **The systemic overconsumption of plastics relates closely to Japanese cultural instincts.** Because of hygiene and food-safety concerns, products are wrapped in several layers of plastic.
- Japanese people are **educated to not litter and to always clean up after themselves.** They also **avoid eating or drinking in public**, and on public transport. Therefore, Japanese streets are usually spotless.
- The Japanese are **very conscious about bringing their trash home**, especially after attending public events. This habit is called *gomi mochikaeri* (ゴミ持ち帰り).
- Despite the lack of a national indoor smoking ban, some **major cities began designating special smoking/non-smoking areas.** Cigarette butts are nowhere to be found.
- It is a **common practice for Japanese stores to give out plastic bags, straws and stirrers.** **Napkins are also presented in plastic packaging.** Drinks, on the other hand, are usually served in paper cups. **All complementary items provided by hotels** (water, toothbrush, soaps, cotton, shower hats etc.) **are wrapped in plastic.**



## Waste generation and management

- According to the United Nations Environment Program, the **plastic packaging industry accounts for 34% of the global plastic production**, and Japan remains **the world's second-largest per capita generator of plastic packaging waste** behind the United States.
- Japan is also **among the world's 10 largest electronic waste offenders**. 16,9kg of e-waste was generated per inhabitant in 2016.
- In spite of having a sophisticated waste management system, Japan dumps from **20,000 to 60,000 tons of plastic waste in the ocean each year**, according to the country's Ministry of the Environment.
- **The average Japanese person uses from 300 to 400 plastic bags yearly**, adding up to 40 billion nationwide.
- An approximate **58% of Japan's discarded plastic is incinerated** in a process called "thermal recycling", used to produce thermal and electric energy. This practice releases a significant amount of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere and contributes to global warming.
- **In the year of 2014, the overall plastic packaging waste per person in Japan amounted to 30kg.**
- **14% of percent of Japan's discarded plastic is exported to poorer countries in Southeast Asia** with insufficient recycling capacity — there are no means of assessing if that waste is being managed properly.
- Only about **14% of the waste is recycled** in Japan.



## Environmental Policies

- **Most initiatives** by the Japanese government **focus on waste collection, sorting and management** – however **little is done about the level of plastic consumption**.
- A new measure requiring **retailers to charge a minimum ¥1 fee for plastic shopping bags** will come into effect in July 24<sup>th</sup>, 2020.
- In 2018, **both the USA and Japan refused to sign G7 pact to reduce the use of single-use plastic**.

## OVERFISHING

### Food culture



- It is a cultural practice in Japan to eat fish in every meal, from morning to evening. They have a special preference for fattier and flavorful fish.
- **In 2016, each Japanese person consumed an average of 45.3 kg of fish.**

According to FAO, **capture fisheries have been declining since the late 1980s**, dropping from 11.2 million tons in 1988 to 3.2 million tons in 2017. This decline was due to **inappropriate fishing practices**, which could potentially endanger the livelihoods of millions of people around the world.



# CAPTURE AND HUNTING OF DOLPHINS AND WHALES IN TAIJI

## Historical context

- Whale hunts and hunting techniques started to develop in Taiji **over 400 years** ago, when commercial operations were introduced in Japan.
- In aftermath of the World War II, whale meat expanded from a regional to a national staple, as the country suffered from a severe food shortage. According to government data, production peaked at **226,000 tons** in the 1960s, but had fallen down to **3,000 tons** by 2017.
- Today, the taste is **mostly preferred by older generations, who eat whale meat out of nostalgia, especially around Taiji area where whale meat dishes are on the menus and meat are found in grocery shops.**
- The overhunting dolphins and whales in the decades after the WWII contributed to the **near extinction of some species in Japanese waters.**



## Capture selection and slaughter in Taiji

- In Wakayama province, south Japan, **whale and dolphins are considered as “an integral part of the local food culture”**. The government stands by dolphin hunting practices, arguing they have sole jurisdiction over the management of small-sized cetaceans.
- The infamous **Cove and its surroundings, where the dolphin slaughter and selection take place**, portrayed in an Oscar-winning documentary by the same name, is situated **next to Taiji Whale Museum.**
- During the hunt period, around **12 boats** leave every morning from and return to the Taiji harbor with dolphins and whales for slaughter. The **slaughter season lasts from September to March every year.**
- Fishers in Taiji work under a **fishing quota system**, limiting the number of **captures for consumption and sales to marine park**. They are allowed to catch up to 1,749 dolphins or small whales during the year 2019/2020 season.
- Attractive specimens can be sold to foreign aquariums for **tens of thousands of dollars each.**
- **China is the major export destination** for live dolphins and whales from Japan. As per the current export agreement with the country, **Taiji delivers 60 live dolphins to marine parks each year.**
- The list of **large importers of live cetaceans** from Japan also includes **Russia, South Korea, Thailand, Vietnam, the Ukraine, and Saudi Arabia.**
- The **Dolphin Project** are present for **six months every year**, in an effort to bear witness of the slaughter and captive selection process of dolphins. The cove-monitors **share real-time footage to draw attention to international public** to these practices.



## Taiji town

- Taiji has a **rich cultural and natural heritage**, with beautiful surroundings.
- Our first impression of Taiji was that of a **ghost town – deserted, abandoned, outdated with whale sculptures and signs everywhere.**

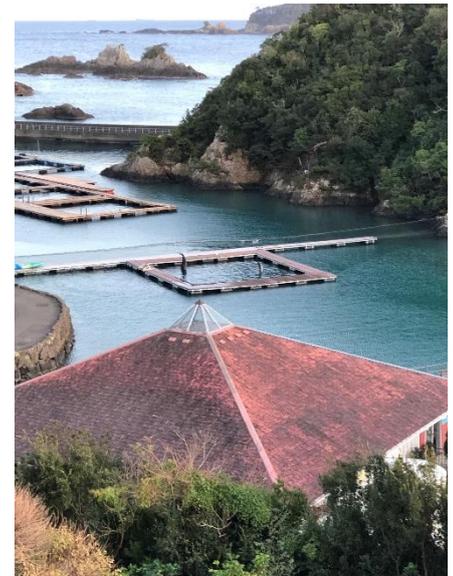
Inhabitants of larger cities we reached out to seemed to be **blissfully unaware of the cetacean slaughter in Taiji**. The town seemed to deliberately keep a low profile.

- The only two foreign tourists we met after four days at the hotel were **completely oblivious to the slaughtering situation**. They had come to hike in the mountains.
- The local businesses, restaurant and hotels seemed to be suffering from the **lack of clients**. The financial motivation behind the slaughtering did not seem to benefit the town as a whole.
- The **police** kept the few visitors at **close watch at all time**. While in town, we were **halted and questioned thoroughly** – including about our dietary preferences. The rare civilian passers-by seemed suspicious of us, showing **hostility and angry looks**.
- From the hotel, we found **view spots to the areas of restricted access of the whale museum**.
- **Outside of our hotel, a whaling boat with its clamp to catch whales were disposed. The same kind of boat is still used of today.**

- What happens in the whale museum, we only found out after entering! We witnessed the **ceaseless training** of dolphins and melon-headed whales for export purposes. The animals were **held captive in either dirty small tanks or in small cages for training purposes**.

- The dolphins were only fed a few small fish from time to time, which is likely an **insufficient amount of food**.
- The trainers were young and seemed **proud to have dominion over the dolphins, standing and surfing on them while teaching them tricks for marine parks**.
- The park's employees seemed particularly **stressed about visitors taking photos of shooting videos**.
- In a **crowded and dirty tank four blind dolphins** were swimming in an **opposite direction from all the other dolphins**.

- While overlooked by the park's employees, the tourists often allowed themselves to **feed and touch the dolphins**. That practice put the animals at risk, making them particularly vulnerable to **transmittable diseases and skin bruises**. In summer, tourists could also learn to train and swim with the dolphins.



- We noticed a group of striped dolphins in a **crowded old pool**. As most of their mates, they followed a busy schedule, which included from **4 to 8 performances a day**.
- In the bay, we identified a false killer whale, a short fin pilot whale, and a melon risso dolphin, 6-, 4- and 3-meter long, respectively, being trained simultaneously for the shows. The trainers would walk and step on them, and play **high-pitched music continuously**. The animals were **granted no food or time to rest** – they looked utterly **bored and dejected**.
- This so called “whale museum” contained so many cages with dolphins captured and forcefully trained nonstop.
- The **entrance fee** to the whale museum and to the dolphins was of 1500 yen – the equivalent of **10 euros**.
- The whale museum **displayed the whaling equipment** (e.g. harpoons). They also provided a **detailed explanation of the whaling history, tradition and of the killing process**.
- The museum’s **souvenir shop** sold **whale meat**, among other items.



## THE COVE

- Some hundred meters from the whale museum, we found the infamous Cove, where the award-winning documentary was filmed in 2009 and the reason why police is now constantly observing.
- It was heartbreaking to witness a place where so many dolphins have been slaughtered or captured. We spotted robes at the stone walls to keep the dolphins tight and we could only image how much suffering there had been here and still is... While we were in Taiji, no slaughter was happening, but the week before and after, lots of dolphins lost their lives there.



- The **reason behind the dolphin slaughter is unclear**. Given the **low demand and selling price of dolphin meat**, as well as the high returns for live specimens, the slaughter is unlikely to be a profitable business. We wonder if some of the meat is used as feedstock in the animal food industry.

- **The Dolphin Base (ルフィンベイス)** is another aquarium in Taiji offering a “swim with the dolphins” program, in addition to the shows. They **look out for westerners**, and denied they were doing dolphin shows when we asked.



## WHAT TO DO?

- **Whales and dolphins' essential role in the ecosystem must be published much more.**
- The decrease in their population poses a severe threat to the planet and to ourselves.
- Many NGO's are already in place and working to stop the hunting process. In this context, **TAF focus is on suggesting innovative solutions for this grave problem.**
- We think Taiji has a rich natural and historical heritage, which could be explored for touristic purposes.
- **The city could be transformed completely into a beautiful spa resort, where visitors would learn about local traditions and the history of extinguished whaling and dolphin practices, as well as enjoy the calmness of its beautiful mountains, temples, beaches and shoreline.**
- Local business could flourish with the implementation of new restaurants, resorts and spas to attract the tourists.
- TAF continues our daily efforts to create awareness about the captivity industry. Say NO to marine parks and YES to alternative playgrounds.



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