

Secret film will show slaughter to the world

Covert operation finally exposes Taiji's annual dolphin horror

By BOYD HARNELL

Special to The Japan Times

For the first time ever, graphic feature-length footage of the annual slaughter of some 2,500 dolphins in Taiji, Wakayama Prefecture, has been captured during a unique yearlong covert operation.

The secret filming by members of the U.S. conservation group Oceanic Preservation Society (OPS) — equipped with state-of-the-art technology and financed to the tune of \$5 million by Netscape founder Jim Clark — is being turned into a major documentary feature film destined for worldwide release this summer (although distribution in Japan is at present not certain).

The story of how this film of the barbaric killing and subsequent butchering of dolphins was made — together with the resulting sale of their meat that



OPS filming team leader Louie Psihoyos (foreground, above) and assistant director Charles Hambleton in camouflage overlooking Taiji's "killing cove," where whalers (below) haul dolphins aboard their boat from the blood-red sea. OPS PHOTOS



massively exceeds Japanese and international limits for mercury content — is told here, exclusively, for the first time anywhere in print.



The footage of the annual seven-month dolphin "drive fisheries" (as they are known in Japan), and of the brutal practices involved in them — as well as the complicity in the killings by various dolphin trainers and officials from Taiji Whale Museum — is sure to shock the world. But whether Japanese people themselves will be able to see the film and arrive at their own conclusions is still by no means certain.

The annual dolphin slaughter at Taiji, a town with a population of some 3,500 in the beautiful Yoshino Kumano Kokuritsu Koen national park, follows a regular pattern.

First, hunter boats from the Taiji Isana Union (numbering at most 13 skiffs, with two crewmen each) head out to sea and surround pods of dolphins or pilot whales (which are actually large dolphins). Then they drive them into a "capture cove" by banging on long metal bell-ended poles placed in the water to disrupt the dolphins' sonar, causing them to become completely disorientated and panic.

After these animals have spent a night supposedly relaxing in the netted-off capture cove (in an attempt by the whalers to make their meat more tender), they are driven to the neighboring "killing cove." There, behind huge blue tarps strung across the cove to keep prying eyes away — in much the same way that Japanese police cordon off crime scenes — the dolphins meet their gruesome predawn end.

It is a gory spectacle that Taiji has long striven to keep anyone from seeing — and one that is crucially fueled by the lucrative, worldwide dolphin captivity and display industry. Aquarium operators, some of whom have claimed to be saving dolphins' lives by selecting a few as performers, pay up to \$150,000 per animal.

The brutal selection process, though — as shown in the OPS footage — causes many of these highly intelligent marine mammals to die of shock or drown.

Meanwhile, cruelty apart, the government-sanctioned slaughter is widely condemned by Japanese scientists, activists and a few Taiji officials, who all cite the serious health issues related to consumption of the dolphins' mercury-tainted meat.



A baby dolphin leaps to its death on rocks (above) after its mother is killed, and a whaler (below) hauls in another speared victim. OPS PHOTOS



One of the officials OPS filmed was Taiji City Councilman Junichiro Yamashita, who organized certified tests on local dolphin meat bought from retail outlets in the town. The shocking test results revealed mercury and methylmercury levels that were 30 and 16 times, respectively, above advisory levels set by the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry. As a result, Yamashita hastily distributed newsletters to Taiji residents warning them to avoid consuming the meat — which he called "toxic waste."

Although a massive blackout of this long-standing butchery of small cetaceans is aided by an apparent self-imposed boycott of the subject by Japan's vernacular and other English-language media, this newspaper has published a 2 1/2-year-long series of exposes that have won it two international press awards from the Humane Society of the United States.

Now, though, the focus is on the meticulously

planned \$2.5-million covert operation — the cost of which is estimated to double by the time of the film's projected release in June.

From their base in Boulder, Colorado, the OPS group made six trips to Wakayama Prefecture, where they were constantly followed by local police and stalked and harassed by Taiji "whalers." Despite this, their mission was successful. Their high-tech film gear was covertly inserted in the "killing cove" and extracted 16 times thanks to the efforts of the film's assistant director, Charles Hambleton, and three members of the OPS team. Their hidden, high-definition (HD) cameras successfully recorded the horror that unfolded behind Taiji's blue tarps. And what they saw was beyond their belief.

Captured dolphins were filmed writhing in pain as Taiji whalers speared them repeatedly or cracked their spines with spiked weapons. Stricken dolphins are also shown thrashing about wildly, blood pouring from their wounds until they finally succumbed. Meanwhile, a number of dolphin trainers and officials from the Taiji Whale Museum are shown cooperating in the slaughter — some even laughing — as the killing cove's bloodied, ruby-red water swept round into the adjacent capture cove.

But perhaps the most iconic scene is one in which a baby dolphin leaps to its death on the rocks after its mother is killed. This really was a surreal and incredibly sad sight to see.

OPS team leader Louie Psihoyos, a world-renowned photographer formerly with National Geographic Magazine, and members of his group, conducted the extraordinary covert operation with the daring elan and minute precision of a military-style, special-forces mission.

With funding from billionaire conservationist Clark, the team was able to use the most sophisticated equipment money could buy. Among their weapons of choice were a battery of HD cameras. Some of those cameras were encased in fake rocks sculpted out of high-density foam by movie-model makers with Kerner Optical (formerly George "Star Wars" Lucas'

Industrial Light and Magic Shop). These disguised cameras were strategically positioned inside the killing cove.

Also included in the formidable lineup of high-tech gear for this covert operation were standard-size HD cameras, \$50,000 military-grade HD forward-looking infrared (FLIR) P-645 thermal cameras (to detect anyone the whalers had on lookout); hydrophones and HD underwater cameras (to record the dolphins' underwater throes); unmanned gyro-stabilized helicopters; a number of "shotgun" microphones disguised as tree branches; walkie-talkies; and a host of ancillary equipment.



Members of a multi-national pro-surfer group at Taiji last October, where — despite harassment by whalers — they formed a prayer circle of protest in the waters of the "killing cove" where dolphins were being speared. OPS PHOTO

The mission objective was to produce a well-balanced, full-length documentary feature for general worldwide release encompassing all facets of the Taiji dolphin cull and its health risks.

"We succeeded," Psihoyos said, "but we also came back with an epic horror film resembling a Steven King novel more than a documentary."

Psihoyos emphasized that the film is neither anti-Japanese nor a "Japan-bashing" production.

In fact, the whole OPS Taiji odyssey (with backing from Clark) began in the winter of 2006. Then, Psihoyos says, "My assistant director, Charles Hambleton, and I had a seven-hour meeting at the mayor's office with Taiji town officials about making a movie of their town.

"An official, who represented Mayor Kazutaka Sangen, said they were concerned about Westerners showing blood in the cove — that it gave the town an evil look."

Psihoyos says he told the officials he would not show blood in his film — if they allowed him to position two cameras at the entrance to the cove and to interview the whalers. After mulling it over, though, both officials and whalers cut off contact with Psihoyos and denied him permission to film near the cove. As well, they demanded that he should restrict footage showing blood — apparently fearful that barbarous images may lead to their drive hunts being banned.



Entrails and internal organs of dolphins killed in "drive fisheries" and then brought to land for butchering lie unsuccessfully hidden from view on the floor of the slaughterhouse in Taiji adjacent to the "killing cove" there. BOYD HARNELL PHOTO

In this volatile atmosphere, local police warned the whalers and their supporters off any repeat of violence or threats of violence such as had happened before. In fact, Nigel Barker, a former Australian resident in Taiji, says he was threatened with bodily harm for providing

The Japan Times with details of the whalers' brutal methods. In another incident, Psihoyos said he, too, was threatened by whalers, who said, "We will kill you."

Amazingly, though, after their talks broke down and the OPS people were leaving their final meeting with Taiji town officials, they were given a detailed map of Taiji, red-lining areas where filming was restricted. This map became a precious tool for planning the group's covert ops over the next year.

Now the gloves were off. No agreement had been made with the officials and Psihoyos immediately planned a thorough reconnaissance of the Taiji area. Precise vantage points were selected to position their cameras. Several camouflaged camera blinds were set up on the headland adjacent to the Whale Museum that overlooks the killing cove. But their major challenge was figuring out how to insert and extract their "rock cameras," underwater cameras,

hydrophones and hidden microphones without being detected.

Psihoyos contacted Ric O'Barry, who captured and trained dolphins for the 1960s TV series "Flipper," asking for his help in detailing the whalers' routine during drive hunts.

O'Barry, head of the international Save Japan Dolphins coalition, had monitored the drives in Taiji for more than five years, and he agreed to be the point man for OPS. O'Barry was already hated by the whalers for his activities, including bringing the media to Taiji to film the brutal drives. In fact, he tells how whalers greet him with throat-cutting gestures when they see him there.

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The Japan Times: Sunday, March 30, 2008
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