

'Cove' mind-set harms Japan

By KEVIN RAFFERTY

Special to The Japan Times

HONG KONG — The ballyhoo, glitz and glamour of the annual Oscars awards had many people in the world waiting with baited breath to see if they could make even a tangential claim to knowing one of the winners. Newspapers cleared their front pages if someone from their town, sometimes even their country, won an Oscar.

But there was a notable exception this year. One tiny town won an Oscar almost all to itself and went into an angry sulk about it. The town is Taiji, a mere speck of 3,500 people in Wakayama Prefecture, whose claim to fame — or infamy — is portrayed in the winning documentary entry, "The Cove."

Every year Taiji's fishermen make a huge din to disorientate and herd hundreds of dolphins into its bay, select a few of the fittest females to sell to aquariums around the world and then slaughter the rest, bloodily turning the sea red.

The Oscar winners used James Bond- style spy cameras, including some disguised as rocks, to infiltrate Taiji and record the slaughter in all its inglorious color. Before then, the annual dolphin kill had been something of a secret since snooping outsiders were quickly expelled from the town.

"The Cove" raises all sorts of questions about Japan's internal politics, including police collusion with the town authorities in expelling intruders. The film also claims that dolphin meat is passed off as whale meat and that the local population suffers from mercury levels 10 times Japan's average, brought in by the hapless dolphins which have imbibed hazardous waste chucked out to sea. Surely these are matters which should be aired publicly for everyone's health and safety.

The dolphin slaughter and reactions to it should also flag some awkward questions for Japan and its foreign relations. To be blunt — which planet does Japan live on? Taiji is angry that the filmmakers used underhanded spying methods to expose the killing. It also argues that outsiders should respect Japan's freedom and special culture.

Similar claimants about Japan's rights to enjoy its own culture have been vocal recently supporting whale-hunting and — perversely — in Japan's refusal to join the rest of the world in a ban on fishing of bluefin tuna.

These episodes illustrate the dangerous tendency of Japan to put itself at the mercy of small but vocal interest groups, and neither to think through the merits of arguments nor to appreciate the position of Japan in the wider world.

Agriculture, including fishing, accounts for a tiny part of Japan's employment and gross domestic product, 4.4 percent and 1.6 percent. Yes, featherbedding of farmers means that Japan is self-sufficient in rice, but at a high price, but not self-sufficient in food. The farm population is also increasingly elderly and productivity is low on small plots.

Whaling is even tinier in its contribution to employment and the economy, and only a minuscule minority of Japanese eat whale meat, even once a year. Yet the industry has managed to capture the government and present itself as the flag bearer for Japanese civilization — which is nonsense. Japanese civilization and culture are far richer than whaling.

A few centuries ago my hometown, Kingston upon Hull, was a considerable whaling port. In the 20th century, it became the world's largest fishing port. Then Iceland decreed an expansion of its territorial waters and declared them off limits to foreign fishermen, leading to the demise of the Hull fishing industry. The United Kingdom gave in to Iceland because of the importance of a NATO military base in Iceland. Has the city recovered? Not completely. Its population has dropped from 300,000 to 250,000 as it continues to struggle with harsh political realities. In Tony Blair's government, the deputy prime minister represented a Hull constituency and today the home minister also has a Hull seat. Even so, their influence cannot trump what is regarded as the national good.

For a tiny town of dolphin slaughterers to call the shots in Japan is just plain daft. For the whale hunters to have the clout they do is a waste of Japan's international political capital.

Fishing is a different matter since fish is a vital part of the Japanese diet. Even so, Japan would be advised to play a constructive role in international forums to establish bans or effective quotas so that there is still fish left in the sea for the next generation. If there is a free-for-all, Japan should be able to see that China is building up its fishing fleet and its appetite for fish and it is obvious who has the deeper pockets.

Japan, unlike the reluctant U.K. that has to wrestle daily with European Union demands on its politics, economics and legal system, has never had to cope on a regular basis with adjusting its domestic policies to foreign demands.

One tiny token of how Japan fears foreigners is that Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama is hesitating over a bill to allow foreigners with permanent residence in Japan the right to vote in local elections. He has faced a spate of opposition based on the xenophobic fear that foreigners might take over the country — which is completely unfounded given that the taxpaying foreigners, who are about 1 percent of the population, would be voting for Japanese candidates and only in local elections.

Another problem is that Japan's politics has long been set in stone. There are signs that this is changing with Hatoyama's new government, but so far its members are not managing to connect the dots into coherent thinking. Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada said this month that the previous Liberal Democratic Party government had followed U.S. foreign policy "too closely" and that from now on "this will be the age of Asia." But Japan has yet to grasp the difficult ramifications of this. It will mean devising new policies to deal with China and with the U.S., a difficult balancing act given the continuing importance of the U.S. security umbrella and growing economic ties with China. The ham-fisted way the government is mishandling the question of U.S. bases in Okinawa suggests the opposite of joined up thinking.

If Japan were powerful like the U.S. or even like China, it could afford to be more carefree about the occasions when it asserts its special culture and traditions. Any serious attempt to create an Asian union or common market would make this apparent. Japan has much to give Asia and the rest of the world, but if it keeps putting its head in the sand over minor issues, Japan will be the first to suffer.

Kevin Rafferty is a former World Bank editor.

The Japan Times: Wednesday, March 17, 2010
(C) All rights reserved