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## The coexistence of whaling and whale watching in a traditional whaling region: The case of Taiji, Wakayama Prefecture, Japan

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### Introduction

The discussion about the relationship between whaling and whale watching is polarised. Anti-whaling groups believe these two activities cannot coexist, and continue to urge that whaling be ended, stressing the economic benefits to be obtained from the sustainable use of cetacean resources. Examples from the Dominican Republic, the Bahamas and other Caribbean locations (Hoyt 1999), and from Vava'u, Tonga (Orams 1999), attempt to demonstrate the superiority of whale watching.

In contrast, whaling groups, composed mainly of anthropologists, economists and sociologists, seek coexistence. They have sounded the alarm on socially and culturally negative impacts caused by converting from whaling to whale watching, and have demonstrated the arbitrariness and overestimation of anti-whaling groups' economic analysis and falsehood of their outcomes. However, both groups place value on economic effects to greater or lesser degree.

Whale watching has been conducted in 87 countries and territories worldwide, attracting over nine million boat- and land-based tourists annually. In 1988, the value of the global whale watching industry was an estimated USD 300 million and a further USD 1049 million was gained from indirect tourism expenditure (Hoyt 2000). Although these estimates are still disputed, it is

clear that the direct and indirect economic impacts of whale watching are extremely important. Further, about 100,000 tourists annually participate in domestic whale watching tours, and many more participate in tours overseas (Hoyt 2000).

Owing to IWC's commercial whaling moratorium, the local economies of Japanese whaling centres have been devastated and their societies disrupted by the exodus of young people in search of employment and careers; and, there is little prospect of change. Although Japan has campaigned for a resumption of whaling at IWC, the prospect for an increase in the coastal whale quota is bleak, to say nothing of full resumption.

Under these circumstances it has been thought that whale watching could become a fast growing tourist industry with a large potential to resuscitate the economies and societies of the traditional whaling communities. But so far no whale watching businesses have developed in traditional Japanese whaling communities.

In this article I examine the traditional whaling community of Taiji, in Wakayama Prefecture, to clarify why a whale watching industry has not developed in traditional whaling communities. I also examine the processes and factors regarding the coexistence of whale watching and whaling in the wider area of southern Wakayama Prefecture, and its application to other whaling communities.

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## Background information on Taiji

The traditional whaling town of Taiji (Fig. 1) is located in the southeast of the Kii Peninsula, close to the southernmost point of the mainland of Japan (Fig. 2). In 2000, the town had a registered resident population of 3892 persons. The population peaked at over 4800 in 1978, but has been declining since.



Figure 1. The traditional whaling town of Taiji



Figure 2. Kii Peninsula, Japan

The principal industries in Taiji are small-scale coastal whaling, other small-scale coastal fisheries and tourism. In the 1960s over 30 per cent of the town's budget derived from the Atlantic Ocean whalers, large- and small-scale whalers, as most residents were then engaged in whaling and related industries.

But as the IWC moratorium struck this small town, the former 200 whalers gradually started losing their jobs. Nowadays, there are only nine small-scale coastal whalers and 27 dolphin hunters. Together they provide only 3.2 per cent of the town's budget.

The main types of mostly small-scale fisheries practised at present are fixed netting, tuna fishing, pole-

and-line fishing, and stick-held dip net (*bouke-ami*). Under these circumstances, the Taiji authorities now attach major importance to promoting tourism. But despite the town's best efforts, the number of both day-trippers and tourists staying overnight has been dropping steadily.

## History as a whaling base

Taiji is known in Japan as the birthplace of "ancient whaling", where the first professional whaling organisation was formed. The town played an important role in the development of whaling methods during the ancient whaling era. In former times hand-held harpoons were used, but this was inefficient as finback, humpback and sei whales sink when they die, so catches were often lost. As a result, net whaling was invented in Taiji in 1675. This technique involved luring whales into an area where a net was set. Once trapped, the whales were seized with other nets and harpooned (Komatsu 2001). The catch numbers increased sharply, and this technique was transferred to Shikoku, Kyushu and other parts of Japan (Freeman 1989). But net whaling ended in Taiji in 1878, when 111 members of a whaling team died in a storm. This incident prompted the introduction of modern whaling to Japan.

## Whaling culture and identity

Taiji is well known for its unique whaling culture. This includes a whale ceremony, festivals with prayers for a good catch, distribution and usage of whale meat, and food customs such as cooking methods are those most widely described.

Among the people of Taiji who share this unique culture and historical background, there exists strong community consciousness based on clear identity as being a member of a traditional whaling community. The public slogan of Taiji, "Town of sun, the black tide and whales" precisely shows this. Public buildings, local stores and the like often use whale characters for decoration, signboards and other purposes.

The strong community consciousness and distinct identity of Taiji was well demonstrated when its citizens rejected administrative consolidation with neighbouring cities and towns. In the 1950s a local spontaneous residents' campaign led to the disregarding of prefectural advice on consolidation. During that period the number of local governments decreased from 27 to 8 in Higashimuro County, to which Taiji belongs. Today, Taiji preserves its identity as the smallest locally governed area in Wakayama Prefecture (WISE 1989).

## Tourism resources

Almost without exception tourist resources in Taiji are related to whales and whaling. These resources can be classified by five types: ancient whaling, modern whaling, academic facilities, “touching” facilities, and whale culture. The representative resources are as follows:

- Ancient whaling: Cape Toumyo, Cape Kajitori, Takatsuka signal station, drifting cenotaph, Jyunshin temple, Toumyo temple, the nets shed and related items.
- Modern whaling: the processing plant, ships for large- and small-scale whaling and related items.
- Academic facilities: the Whale Museum and related institutions.
- Touching facilities: facilities for swimming with dolphins, dolphin show.
- Whale culture: festivals, distribution and use of whale meat and food customs, among others.

Although the local government and residents have endeavoured to use all available tourist resources, the number of tourists visiting Taiji continues to decline. Local government data on tourist arrivals show that the total annual visitors reached about 0.5 million in 1976, after which it declined to about 0.31 million for a decade. However, it increased remarkably in 1982, the year of IWC’s adoption of a blanket moratorium on commercial whaling. The number of visitors peaked at 0.51 million in 1995 but thereafter continued to drop sharply to 0.3 million in 2001.

Given the severe economic conditions in Taiji, and the strong desire of the local government to develop tourism as a replacement industry for whaling, it could easily be imagined that the whale watching business would have developed. However, whale watching has never developed in the town, and Taiji citizens do not even consider the possibility.

## Why has the whale watching business not developed?

There are three principal reasons why whale watching has not developed in Taiji.

The first is Taiji peoples’ image of whale watchers, which overlaps with their image of excessive and aggressive environmentalists. The ultimate objective of most environmental groups is to put an end to “the primitive and barbarous practice of whaling”. They believe whale watching is the one way to “use” cetaceans in a sustainable way. Thus, Taiji people believe that the symbolic meaning of whale watching is anti-whaling. It is not a surprise that

the traditional whaling community of Taiji has a negative image of those who deprive them of whaling, and thus associates whale watching with a plot to make whale watchers repeatedly confront whalers, and eventually eradicate whaling. Further, people in Taiji have seen, through the media, aggressive environmental groups deliberately colliding with whaling ships from Japan, Iceland and Norway.

Small-scale coastal whaling nowadays operates under extremely severe business conditions, with tight restrictions on catch numbers, seasons and whaling grounds. Under such conditions, operations are barely profitable. The future of small-scale coastal whaling depends totally on how whalers operate to fulfil their quotas in the most efficient way. Taiji whalers are anxious that any impediment to the efficiency of their operations may be fatal to the industry.

Taiji people are also concerned that if animal-loving whale watchers should actually witness whales being harpooned and then processed it would convey a negative image of Taiji.

Even if the negative image Taiji people have of whale watchers and the negative image observers have of whaling activities change in Japan, people in Taiji find it very hard to handle the concept of whale watching as a local activity.

## Rejection of the idea of converting from “hunting” to “watching”

People in Taiji believe they are the descendants of the legendary “ancient whalers”, the very core of their shared community identity. “Hunting” whales is the tradition that they have inherited over generations. But nowadays, without even acknowledging their basic role in the cultural, economic and social life of Taiji, larger forces have turned cetaceans into “eco-political resources” (Ohmagari 2002). As a result, their identity as whalers was unilaterally suppressed. “Watching” whales is an integral part of this suppression and is, thus, totally unacceptable to them.

## Social constraints from the tight community consciousness

A well-organised professional whaling group in the “ancient whaling” era required numerous human resources. In those days, most residents of Taiji were involved with whaling in various ways such as boat crew, boat captain, manufacturers and craftsmen of whaling gears, whale processors, and whale meat distributors, among many other jobs. In addition to the men, women and children

played an important role in the business. Everyone in the community depended on whaling, since there was little cultivable land and the community had long been fully dependent on marine resources, especially whales. Whaling was so highly profitable that, as one of the historical food encyclopaedia written more than 300 years ago stated, “hunting one whale would enrich seven villages” and “hunting three whales a year would bring massive wealth” (Komatsu 2001). Since the entire community was involved with whaling, the occupation engendered an extremely tight community consciousness.

Formation of such social consciousness continues even today. But the focus has changed. It is not so much the whaling itself, but the Taiji people’s shared wish to recover the basis of their identity. This long-continuing process has, at the same time, also given rise to social constraints. As a consequence, it is unexpectedly difficult for Taiji people to set up a whale watching business.

### **Coexistence between whaling and whale watching in and around Taiji**

As shown above, although there are some incentives to introduce whale watching as a new tourism resource, several sociocultural factors prevent its introduction in the community. It can be assumed that whale hunting and whale watching cannot coexist in Taiji.

The same types of social constraints are not found in nearby communities. This has given rise to a different form of coexistence between whales and whale-watchers, with the latter operating in several communities near Taiji.

### **Whale watching companies around Taiji**

Five companies operating a total of six boats conduct whale watching in the Taiji area. There are two in Katsura, another two in Kushimoto and one in Koza. Each company owns one boat except for one company in Kushimoto. The capacity at one time ranges from 4 to 156 watchers. The operating season runs from April to the end of September.

### **The interaction of pioneering whale watching company and the Taiji whaling community**

This company (called here “Anon Co”) was the first to introduce whale watching around Taiji. It was established in 1991 by several former dolphin hunters. By 2002, Anon Co had approximately 2500 customers, and has had over 30,000 since its establishment.

Three distinct stages can be distinguished in the interactions between Taiji and this company.

The early stage corresponds to the time when the dolphin hunters were planning to set up a whale watching business. Some, who were also the future founders of the company, consulted a person closely involved with whaling to seek his advice regarding potential operational problems from the whaling standpoint. This person advised them not to operate during the dolphin hunting season, which begins in October, since it would not be advisable for whale watchers to witness the slaughter of dolphins.

The middle stage corresponds to the period from the establishment of the company to a few years later. Since the company’s establishment, no substantial talks between the whalers and the company have taken place. However, both parties have been extremely cautious about not letting tourists witness the actual hunting and killing of dolphins at sea by tourists — but, this has occurred, and the tourists reacted calmly, contrary to the company’s fear. There has been no conflict between the whalers and the company, despite minor incidents.

While being conscious and having reached an understanding regarding each others’ interests, the relationship proceeded to the next step, when the whalers and the whale watching company gradually started talking and cooperating. At this time, the whale watching business in the area became well recognised and financially stable, and other companies emerged in neighbouring areas.

The Anon Co played a central role in establishing the Wakayama Whale Watching Association to administer the companies founded later, maintain order, and help them avoid trouble with whalers. Further, the association attempted to promote a positive interaction and began to hold an annual social event with the whalers. As a result, for the last five years the whalers and the companies have been informing each other about the location, types, size and other useful data about whales they encounter.

### **Factors of coexistence**

From the above information, several factors emerge regarding the coexistence between whales and whale watching companies.

#### **1. *Coexistence in an area including neighbouring communities***

If there is no basis to set up a whale watching business within a community and no social capacity to accept it from outside, then the pos-



sibility of coexistence within a single whaling community may be considered extremely low. But coexistence with neighbouring communities that lack their own whaling tradition, and would not cause confrontation and conflict with whalers, could facilitate the development of a whale watching business.

## 2. *Whale watching as a kind of "fishery"*

Operators don't base their whale-watching business around Taiji and its neighbouring areas on their love of cetaceans. For these whale-watching companies, whale watching is nothing but a kind of fishery and a more economically productive business than dolphin hunting.

## 3. *Setting rules that consider the whalers*

The local rules self-imposed on whale watchers recognise that traditional whalers are the primary users of cetaceans and whale watching companies are secondary users. The establishment of the adequate, self-monitoring rules that cover the relationship between both major stakeholder groups are essential for coexistence.

## 4. *Information sharing is important*

In the case of Taiji, even though whalers cannot obtain a direct profit from the information they give to the whale watching businesses, the information they receive in return from those companies about whales seen is vital in that it enables more efficient hunting. So, information sharing is mutually profitable to both parties that share in and profit from the limited cetacean resources.

## Applicability and problems

The type of coexistence described above between the whaling and the whale watching interests in the Taiji area can be applied to other traditional whaling regions that suffer similar constraints and problems. However, some prerequisites need to be fulfilled.

First, should the whale watching business be developed around traditional whaling bases? Different species of cetaceans pass through different areas, and some whale species are not suited for whale watching, especially those that surface only briefly and then dive for hours. A sea area in which these species of whales predominate would not provide a suitable base for a profitable whale watching business.

Second, even though a whale watching business might be successful in neighbouring areas, coexis-

tence with whalers cannot be expected if the watching is based on a love of cetaceans. Whale watching based on this type of emotion cannot accept whaling, and the whalers would become cautious and estranged from the whale watching business. Under such circumstances cooperation based on establishment of appropriate rules and information sharing would never emerge.

Finally, the coexistence at Taiji is based on the mutual benefit of information sharing. Were more severe IWC restrictions imposed, such as outright bans on particular species, then it is likely that the quality of information the watchers could provide to the whalers would deteriorate. If there is no benefit for the whalers, it is likely that the interaction between the two groups would be crucially weakened.

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