‘Cove’ mind-set harms Japan

By KEVIN RAFFERTY

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HONG KONG — The ballyhoo, glitz and glamour of the annual Oscars awards had made many people in the world waiting with bated breath to see if they could make even a tangential attempt to know 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, mere speck of 3,500 people in Wakayama Prefecture, whose claim to fame — or infamy — is portrayed in the provocative 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 aquaria around the world and then slaughter the rest, boiling the sea red.

The Oscar winners used James Bond-style spy cameras, including some dispensed as rocks, to infiltrate Taiji and record the slaughter in all its gory confusion. Before then, the animal droits were 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 and that the local population suffers from mercury levels 10 times the 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, which — what 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 clamors about Japan’s rights to enjoy its own culture have been vociferously recently supporting whale-hunting and — perversely — in Japan’s refusal to join the rest of the world in a ban on whaling.

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 economic output. Even so, Japan’s refusal to join the rest of the world in a ban on fishing of bluefin tuna is an affront to Japan’s economic and外交 position. It has lost a secret since snooping outsiders were quickly expelled from the town.

In the 25th 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 it mattered more for 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.

There was a notable exception this year. One tiny town won an Oscar. Newspapers cleared their front pages if someone from their town, sometimes even their country, won an Oscar. Even so, their influence cannot trump what is regarded as the national goal.

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