

Japan's eco-credentials assailed

Seafood policy seen negating moral authority
By ERIC JOHNSTON

Staff writer

OSAKA — Six months before Japan hosts a major U.N. conference on biodiversity, the government and major corporations involved in the issue are conducting a series of events to raise public awareness about threats to the world's ecosystems and what can be done to save natural habitats.

But global criticism over Japan's stance on whales, dolphins and tuna has led environmental activists abroad to question if Tokyo can lead in biodiversity preservation.

Some Japanese nongovernmental organizations also wonder if incidents ranging from clashes earlier this year between antiwhaling activists and the whaling fleet to Japan's role a few weeks ago in successfully preventing a ban on bluefin tuna trade will affect the government's ability to successfully host the October biodiversity conference.



Gone fishing: Masanori Miyahara, head of Japan's delegation and the country's top fisheries official, holds a news conference with Patrick van Klaveren, head of the Monaco delegation, during a meeting of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species in Doha on March 18.
AP PHOTO

"Japan's government has no moral authority on biodiversity issues," said Ric O'Berry, the American dolphin activist featured in the Oscar-winning documentary "The Cove," which details the annual dolphin hunt in Taiji, Wakayama Prefecture.

"The Fisheries Agency's actions on dolphins, whales and bluefin tuna seriously undermine science-based management and international accords to protect marine life," he said, adding that such actions will damage Japan's credibility at the COP10 biodiversity conference in Nagoya, where the United Nations hopes to conclude an agreement on biodiversity preservation goals.

Just a few weeks after "The Cove" won the Academy Award for best documentary and created a backlash in Japan among those who see eating dolphin meat as a part of the country's traditional food culture, Japanese delegates led a successful effort at the Convention of the International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora meeting in Doha to prevent a ban on the international trade in Atlantic bluefin tuna.

Japan consumes about 80 percent of the world's bluefin tuna. The population of Western Atlantic bluefin tuna dropped 82 percent between 1957 and 2007 while Eastern Atlantic bluefin declined 74 percent, according to the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas.

Tokyo argued for proper management of stocks under ICCAT instead of a ban.

Following the meeting in Doha, environmental journalist Charles Clover, writing in the March 28 edition of the influential British newspaper The Sunday Times, called for a boycott of Japanese firms like Mitsubishi Corp. that trade in bluefin tuna and for sanctions against Japanese airlines transporting it.

"In my view, Japan's victory in Doha was an enormous diplomatic mistake, based on prejudice rather than principle, and it has not gone unnoticed by the public. Japan's government knows that, sooner or later, it simply has to address the issue of sustainability, but nobody wants to be the first to change such a hoary plank of foreign policy as Japan's right to eat all of the fish," Clover wrote.

Paul Watson, founder and president of the Sea Shepherd activist group, also urged an NGO boycott of COP10 in a statement released last week.

"What this meeting will do is lend legitimacy to Japan, arguably one of the most irresponsible nations on Earth for the practice of overexploitation of species," Watson wrote. "I appeal to the large NGOs like Greenpeace, World Wildlife Fund, Conservation International, Friends of the Earth, etc. to not attend this meeting and to not lend legitimacy to this charade in Nagoya."

2010 has been designated the international year of biodiversity, and international attention on Japanese policies toward such endangered species comes at a time when the government is stepping up domestic efforts to prepare for COP10.

Last month, at a public expo in Osaka to promote the conference, more than 100 national and local government bodies, NGOs and businesses passed out information on the sustainable use of forests, protecting endangered species in Japan like the Blakiston's fish owl and the dugong, various environmentally friendly products and business practices, and the efforts that local governments are making to preserve biodiversity.

The Osaka event was held two days after the CITES conference, but Japanese officials said the tuna row would not affect the Nagoya parley.

"I'm not worried about Japan's actions over bluefin tuna affecting our leadership at COP10 because its purpose is to reach agreement on biodiversity preservation as a whole. There are other international conferences and treaties for protecting specific species," said Daizaburo Kuroda, a senior councilor for the Environment Ministry who attended the Osaka expo.

Between now and October, the government, major NGOs and businesses will hold nearly a dozen seminars around the country related to COP10 and biodiversity.

At COP10, preservation of natural habitats through the creation of sanctuaries will be a major topic of discussion. For terrestrial life, Japan will seek recognition for the Satoyama Initiative, which aims to protect not only pristine wilderness but also conserve farmlands and forests that were developed for agriculture.

COP10 is still six months away, which gives the current criticism plenty of time to die down. But if it doesn't, the government and the U.N. delegates who show up in Nagoya may find that international political pressure due to the efforts of activists could grow to the point where they are forced to spend time dealing with the specific issues they raise.

Yoshimasa Harano of CBD Shimin Net said the government may have to deal with international criticism over whales, dolphins and tuna in Nagoya.

"There's no direct link between COP10 and CITES. But Japan's actions over tuna in particular could likely leave a bad impression on delegates to the former conference," Harano said. "In addition, the issue of (Japan's policies toward) whales and dolphins in particular has garnered media attention worldwide because clashes between Japanese whalers and Sea Shepherd and the film 'The Cove' have created a negative image of Japan."