Japanese eco-credentials assailed

Seafood policy seen negating moral authority

By ERIC JOHNSTON

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 warn 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.

“Japan’s government has no moral authority on biodiversity issues,” said Pic Olcer, 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 Japan’s ability to seek recognition for the Satoyama Initiative, which aims to protect not only biodiversity but also traditional food culture and forest management methods 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 74 percent between 1957 and 2007 while Eastern Atlantic bluefin declined 74 percent, according to the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tuna.

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

“After this meeting will decide to bring up the debate in Nagoya, according to the government’s negotiation with delegates that are likely to ban the trade in Atlantic bluefin tuna in Nagoya,” Watson wrote. “I appeal to the large NGOs like Greenpeace, World Wildlife Fund, Conservation International and others to attend this meeting and to not lend legitimacy to this charade in Nagoya.”

2010 has been designated the international year of biodiversity, and national and local government bodies, NGOs and businesses have been working to prepare for COP10.

The Okinawa expo was held two days after the CITES conference, but Japanese officials said the Okinawa government would not bring up the issue of tuna affecting its 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 Yamashita, a professor of law at Waseda University.

Yamashita also urged an NGO boycott of COP10 in a statement released last week.

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Last month, at a public expo in Osaka to promote the conference, more than 100 national and local government bodies, NGOs and businesses passed the “Osaka Declaration on Marine Biodiversity,” which urged for the protection of marine biodiversity.

The declaration called for agreements on sustainable use of marine resources, science-based management, and an end to commercial whaling.

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