The Flipper Debate: Japanese Fisher Handout

General Introduction

During the next class session we will watch clips from a film that focuses on the killing of dolphins in Japan. After watching the clip, we will all be participating in a preliminary governmental hearing about a dispute depicted in the film. There are two sides in the dispute and you will be playing the role of someone on one of the sides: either Japanese fishermen and women or Western filmmakers and animal activists. The purpose of the hearing is to help the judge (role played by your teacher) determine whether or not “the powers that be” should take future action against the killing of dolphins in Japan. The main issue you should focus on in this hearing is whether or not the parties involved in the dispute have been unfair and unethical in how they have treated dolphins or each other during the dispute. In other words, your role is to convince the judge that the people on the other side of the dispute are somehow wrong, unfair, unethical, and/or misguided in their behaviors and beliefs. After watching the film, you will have some time to prepare your case and to select a spokesperson or spokesperson to cross examine the other side and to present your arguments to the judge. Before class, however, to help you get ready for the hearing, you should read and get familiar with the following material.

Japanese Fisher Role

You are being asked to play the role of members of the Japanese fishing communities from islands such as Iki and Taiji. The conflict centers on different perspectives and attitudes toward the dolphin. These conflicts have been going on for decades and recently became a hot topic, due to the award winning movie, The Cove. This documentary style movie takes a strong stand against the Japanese practice of killing dolphins for any reason and records a covert effort to stop this. The filmmakers gloss over the fact that they broke various local and international laws in their attempt to change the Japanese practices of selling dolphins, killing them for food, or working to control their population in the same way we control the population of rats or other pests.

Taking the Japanese perspective may be difficult as we come from a culture that has many positive associations with dolphins. To help you with this process, we will provide a little information on two common associations related to dolphins in these communities: A) that dolphins are dangerous pests and B) that they are a food item like many other animals.

Dangerous Pest

A 1993 article by Hall and Noguchi recorded in detail the Japanese view of dolphins as dangerous pests. They began their article with the following story that illustrated the Japanese fishing community’s perspective.

Not too many years ago in Japan, large numbers of gangsters invaded various coastal territories causing disastrous damage, particularly to the community of Iki. The Iki fishermen were faced with a choice. They could either stand by and watch their families suffer, their material goods stolen and their whole way of life lost, or they could stand up and fight to preserve their families, children and way of life. They chose the latter, thus positioning themselves as heroic warriors. The beaches around the island of Iki came to be a combat zone. The battle, as expected, was a difficult one and so they decided to make a plea for help from other Japanese, via their government. This plea proved to be unsatisfactory, for, although they received some assistance in the battle being waged, the message was intercepted by outsiders. These gaijin or foreigners were attracted to the scene of trouble and, though they smiled and nodded in understanding, they began to engage in covert operations to assist the gangsters. These gaijin lacked understanding and compassion and, thus, were incapable (either by choice or ignorance) of recognizing the plight...
of the people of Iki or their heroic struggles. Rather, they tried to use this opportunity as a time to impose their own will upon the fishermen and the Japanese in general.

This story deals with a series of events that had international prominence a number of years ago. The story was written in a way that avoided the immediate pre-judgments that existed at the time in reference to the dolphin controversy. The term gangsters refers to dolphins. The conflict described in the story reached international prominence when media coverage of dolphin killing brought world-wide attention to the island of Iki in Japan. The Iki fishermen had invited Japanese TV reporters to cover the story of dolphin slaughter, hoping and expecting that the coverage would help them raise awareness of their plight and gain compensation from the Nagasaki Prefectural Government for the declining local catch which was attributed to an increasing dolphin presence in local waters. However, the coverage reached around the world, and their efforts to gain public sympathy conversely resulted in shock and outrage in Western societies. After the media coverage, individual Western conservationists entered Iki island to convince the Iki fishermen that dolphins were not responsible for the declining local catch; however, none of the Westerners proposed alternative methods for dealing with the dolphins that seemed to work.

The Japanese in these fishing communities (not necessarily all Japanese) see the dolphin in much the way many ranchers in the U.S. view wolves, as pests that are threatening their very livelihood. Over the years, Japanese fishermen had come to view dolphins, who gobble up large quantities of fish and squid, as direct competitors for the resources that enable life. Just as a rancher may be interested in seeing a wolf at the zoo, but not around their land, the Japanese may be fine with dolphins in captivity, but do not want them in the waters they fish. The Japanese term for dolphin, iruka, is frequently replaced by terms such as enemies or gangsters in the everyday talk of the fishermen. Also, terms such as damage, steal, and threat typically co-occur with references to the dolphin by the Japanese. Dolphins are discussed as perpetrators of malicious harm and as an evil that must be tightly controlled for the well-being of the community. The fishing community’s call for help to their national government brought some help, but also brought strangers, mostly Americans, to their land. These strangers were seen to have warm smiles, but devious hearts. The strangers could not feel the appropriate compassion for their plight, but instead subtly sought to hinder the islanders' fight for their own personal advantages. The dolphin was seen by the Japanese in this particular area as a truly menacing creature, for its threat was not simply to a job or source of income that can be changed, albeit inconveniently, but a threat to their very way of being (somewhat like the wolf is seen in some communities in the United States). This is a very different view of the dolphin than the friendly Flipper image in the West. So, if you can imagine a particular pest, rat, snake, etc., that you would be glad to have removed, then you can start to have a feeling for how many in the Japanese fishing community feel about the dolphin.

The filmmakers do very little with the Japanese perspective of dolphins as pests (it is mentioned briefly once and then discounted). It is easier for them to focus on showing the unpleasant pictures of animals dying (the same has been shown of slaughterhouses in the U.S.) or pointing out the mercury in the dolphin to discount them as food (many fish we eat in the United States also have problems with mercury, see www.foodandwaterwatch.org), and to describe the problems of captivity in “freedom loving creatures” (why do we have so many zoos?) than to deal with the pest issue. It is also easier for the filmmakers to show themselves as cool, undercover people avoiding the bumbling foreign police, than to take time explaining the ethics of breaking laws and lying.

**Food**

Historically the dolphin has also been seen as a food source itself, though that is less and less common. The history of using dolphins as food goes beyond just Japan. Records show that the dolphin was used as food by King Henry’s court in England. The research by Hall and Noguchi (1993) indicates that dolphin meat is not as popular as it once was and that may in part be related to the growing perception of them as
predator and dangerous pest. However, in some of the smaller communities in Japan the dolphin is still considered a legitimate food item. In Western cultures, animals that are traditionally seen as a food resource are not considered in the same light as those we would not typically consider eating (dog and horse). So, although those in the West may cringe at eating dolphin, it is the same in principle as those from India who would cringe at the beef we eat. Therefore, the killing and use of dolphin is no different than the millions of cows, pigs, chickens, and so forth killed in slaughterhouses in the United States every year. If you are okay eating beef, pork, chicken, etc., at a restaurant, then you can likely relate the lack of concern many Japanese, in places like Taiji, have about killing and eating dolphins. It has been said that we would all be vegetarians if we could see what happened at a slaughterhouse (you may want to check out one of the many websites on this, such as http://www.veganoutreach.org/whyvegan/slaughterhouses.html). Yet, as a cultural community the U.S. still eats millions of cows every year. It is unpleasant to see what goes on in a slaughterhouse and will be unpleasant to watch dolphins die as well, especially with narrators framing them as family members when they talk about them. In this role play you need to be able to see the dolphin as just any animal that could be eaten or any pest that is in serious need of control.

The problems of biased footage and presentation of material in The Cove are compounded by the routine disregard of the law in these communities. Although some of the Japanese stand to block the trespassing engaged in by the filmmakers’ team, they show certainly as much restraint as U.S. Americans at a slaughterhouse would show to people breaking in illegally to tape what is going on with the cows before they come to our plate. If you were a Japanese police officer, trying to be nice and still do your job, how much respect do you think you would have for someone like Ric O’ Berry who blatantly lies to you, as shown in the film? If someone from Japan came here to the United States, broke our laws, lied to our police, and made a film which presents a very one-sided portrayal of our habit of eating chicken or controlling rodents, how much respect would we have for them?

Hopefully, this handout has given you a chance to get a better feel for how many Japanese see some from the West who come to their community to demand change. Best wishes on the role play next class.

Reference