

Japan whaling town battles for survival

By Teruaki Ueno

TAIJI, Japan (Reuters) - When Tameo Ryono first sailed about five decades ago from the remote Japanese village of Taiji to catch whales, he was filled with pride.



A captured short-finned pilot whale is measured by fishery workers including Fisheries Agency employees at Taiji Port in Japan's oldest whaling village of Taiji, 420 km (260 miles) southwest of Tokyo, June 4, 2008.

"Whalers were stars here in Taiji. I got what I had dreamed of since I was a little boy," the tall, softspoken Ryono told Reuters at a community centre in Japan's oldest whaling village, nestled in a sprawling national park near the craggy Pacific coast.

"I'm proud of being able to do whaling throughout my life."

But Ryono, 71, looks all but certain to be the last in his family to engage in whaling, as harsh criticism from conservationists and foreign countries, and changing appetites at home threaten a way of life whalers say stretches back 400 years.

The International Whaling Commission (IWC) banned commercial whaling in 1986, but is now bitterly divided between countries such as Australia that say all whales still need protection, and those such as Japan that argue some species are abundant enough for limited hunting. The group meets in Chile later this month. Japan and Australia agreed on Thursday not to let the dispute hurt bilateral ties. The two countries would also work to find a solution to the whaling controversy, Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd told reporters after meeting Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda. Japan conducts what it calls scientific research whaling in Antarctica. Critics say it's a cover for commercial whaling and that harpooning whales and cutting them up for processing on big factory ships is hardly traditional compared to the methods once used.

*Ryono family Note 1: Chiyomatsu (Oji-chan) was the eldest son of Chikadaiyu Ryono.

As such he retained the Ryono land even though he settled in Terminal Island, CA in America. Even after his death in 1945, his family held the title to the land in Japan. I think that not long after the war, the American Ryono family simply gave the land in Japan to a Ryono cousin. I recall my Dad saying that Tameo Ryono and his family were extremely grateful and only regretted not being able to host more of the American Ryono family. In a town of 3,000 the Tameo Ryono in the interview below must be 'our' Tameo-san!

* Ryono family Note 2: My Dad (Chikao) liked to recall (with admiration) that his grandfather would sit at the head of a large table and all would have to wait for him to begin after he took a sip from a large saucer-like plate. He was also very tall and was bald.

Tameo Ryono joined the crew of a 490-tonne whaling ship on an Antarctic voyage at age 18, learning his skills from veterans for a decade before he was considered a full-fledged whaler. His son, however, has not followed suit.

“Everybody of my generation wanted to become whalers,” said 42-year-old Fumitoshi Ryono, who instead opted to become a local civil servant in Taiji, 420 km (260 miles) southwest of Tokyo.

“I was hoping to become a whaler when I was a student, but whaling companies were going through restructuring and weren’t recruiting whalers those days.”

When Tokyo joined the IWC moratorium on commercial whaling in 1987, more than 50 Taiji whalers lost their jobs. Now only 40 out of Taiji’s population of 3,500 are whalers, contributing just a few percent of its tax revenues compared to over 70 per cent in 1966, when the industry was at its peak.

Fumitoshi Ryono has no plan to urge his son to take up the harpoon. “I don’t think I should tell my son to become a whaler. That’s something he should decide,” he said.

TAIJI WHALING HISTORY: DEVASTATING SHIP WRECK

For hundreds of years, coastal whaling in Taiji was done from colorful wooden boats using huge rope nets and hand harpoons. Villagers still recount the massive shipwreck during a storm that killed more than 100 Taiji whalers in 1878, virtually destroying the traditional industry.

But it was revived in the early 1900s with modern whaling techniques from Norway. Today’s coastal whaling now uses steam-powered vessels and gun harpoons.



When Japan began Antarctic whaling in the 1930s, many Taiji men joined the expeditions. These days, whalers in Taiji survive thanks to an annual local government quota that allows them to catch about 2,000 pilot whales and dolphins in coastal waters. Such species do not fall under IWC restrictions.

But Taiji’s bloody semi-annual dolphin “drives” are sometimes filmed surreptitiously, and spark impassioned protests from animal rights activists. Japan wants to expand coastal whaling, and last year threatened to quit the IWC after anti-whaling countries blocked its proposal to let four villages, including Taiji, kill minke whales similar to “community whaling” allowed for Alaska natives, who eat whale meat as a staple and use it for cultural practices.

DEFIANT

Taiji Mayor Kazutaka Sangen has not lost hope of reviving the local whaling industry and keeping the tradition alive.



“Despite various tragedies and hardship, our ancestors did not cut their ties to whales,”
“It is Taiji’s mission to pass on our whaling techniques and food culture to future generations.”

But conservationists are not convinced.

“The people of Taiji argue that whaling is their culture and tradition. But there is a gap between whaling in the Antarctic Ocean and coastal whaling,” said Greenpeace Japan’s executive director, Jun Hoshikawa. “I wonder how they see this gap. Is whaling in the Antarctic really Taiji’s tradition?”



Sangen is struggling to keep pride in whaling alive. The town has launched a program to teach young citizens about whaling. The mayor also helped put whale meat back in school lunches, reviving a practice encouraged after World War Two by U.S. occupation forces to feed a hungry population.

“Unless we revive whale meat school lunches, we will lose our food culture,” he said.

Even in Taiji, however, there are some dissenters. Last year, a local assemblyman called for a halt to the school lunches over concerns about high mercury content in the meat.

Despite the criticism, Sangen remains defiant.

“We and our successors will keep telling the world proudly and loudly that Taiji has its long history of whaling and the people of Taiji are catching whales,” he said.