



Filmmakers outsmart dolphin killers: Secret film will expose Japan's brutality

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Japanese fishermen drag still living dolphins over the pavement by truck to slaughterhouse facilities where they brutally kill the animals in cruel rituals of sadistic violence celebrated by Japan's racist, anti-western ultranationalist extremists.

TAIJI, Japan (3 Apr 2008) — For the first time ever, graphic feature-length footage of the annual slaughter of some 2,500 dolphins in Taiji, Wakayama Prefecture, has been captured during a unique yearlong covert operation.

The secret filming by members of the U.S. conservation group Oceanic Preservation Society (OPS) — equipped with state-of-the-art technology and financed to the tune of \$5 million by Netscape founder Jim Clark — is being turned into a major documentary feature film destined for worldwide release this summer (although distribution in Japan is at present not certain).

The story of how this film of the barbaric killing and subsequent butchering of dolphins was made — together with the resulting sale of their meat that massively exceeds Japanese and international limits for mercury content — is told here, exclusively, for the first time anywhere in print.

The footage of the annual seven-month dolphin "drive fisheries" (as they are known in Japan), and of the brutal practices involved in them — as well as the complicity in the killings by various dolphin trainers and officials from Taiji Whale Museum — is sure to shock the world. But whether Japanese people themselves will be able to see the film and arrive at their own conclusions is still by no

The OPS group was headquartered in hotel rooms in the area, where their missions were planned and piles of pricey equipment occupied most of the space. Two vans were rented to haul their weighty gear to their target locations. Another small, unobtrusive rental car driven by OPS member Joe Chisholm was used for scouting — mostly for monitoring the Taiji harbor area to check if drive boats were out. Chisholm also kept an eye on the roads to detect whether police were following the group. Altogether, the incredible challenges of making this film elevated it to a major undertaking on a scale never before attempted.

Throughout this buildup period, drive fisheries were being conducted during daylight. If the whalers were successful, captured dolphins would be trapped in the holding cove sealed off with nets. Before daybreak the next day, men in motorboats would herd the panicked animals into the killing cove of no return.

The horror of the dolphins' final moments there were recorded not only by the "rock cameras" above the waterline, but also from below by using underwater microphones and an underwater "blood-cam" HD camera devised by OPS high-tech guru Simon Hutchins, which yielded graphic footage of the sea slowly turning red as the killings continued.

To make this possible, OPS called on Mandy-Rae Cruickshank, a seven-time world

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means certain.

The annual dolphin slaughter at Taiji, a town with a population of some 3,500 in the beautiful Yoshino Kumano Kokuritsu Koen national park, follows a regular pattern.

First, hunter boats from the Taiji Isana Union (numbering at most 13 skiffs, with two crewmen each) head out to sea and surround pods of dolphins or pilot whales (which are actually large dolphins). Then they drive them into a "capture cove" by banging on long metal bell-ended poles placed in the water to disrupt the dolphins' sonar, causing them to become completely disorientated and panic.

After these animals have spent a night supposedly relaxing in the netted-off capture cove (in an attempt by the whalers to make their meat more tender), they are driven to the neighboring "killing cove." There, behind huge blue tarps strung across the cove to keep prying eyes away — in much the same way that Japanese police cord off crime scenes — the dolphins meet their gruesome predawn end.

It is a gory spectacle that Taiji has long striven to keep anyone from seeing — and one that is crucially fueled by the lucrative, worldwide dolphin captivity and display industry. Aquarium operators, some of whom have claimed to be saving dolphins' lives by selecting a few as performers, pay up to \$150,000 per animal.

The brutal selection process, though — as shown in the OPS footage — causes many of these highly intelligent marine mammals to die of shock or drown.

Meanwhile, cruelty apart, the government-sanctioned slaughter is widely condemned by Japanese scientists, activists and a few Taiji officials, who all cite the serious health issues related to consumption of the dolphins' mercury-tainted meat.

One of the officials OPS filmed was Taiji City Councilman Junichiro Yamashita, who organized certified tests on local dolphin meat bought from retail outlets in the town. The shocking test results revealed mercury and methylmercury levels that were 30 and 16 times, respectively, above advisory levels set by the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry. As a result, Yamashita hastily distributed newsletters to Taiji residents warning them to avoid consuming the meat — which he called "toxic waste."

Although a massive blackout of this long-standing butchery of small cetaceans is aided by an apparent self-imposed boycott of the subject by Japan's vernacular and other English-language media, this newspaper has published a 2 1/2-year-long series of exposes that have won it two international press awards from the Humane Society of the United States.

Now, though, the focus is on the meticulously planned \$2.5-million covert operation — the cost of which is estimated to double by the time of the film's projected release in June.

From their base in Boulder, Colorado, the OPS group made six trips to Wakayama Prefecture, where they were constantly followed by local police and stalked and harassed by Taiji "whalers." Despite this, their mission was successful. Their high-tech film gear was

'grounded' after airport tantrum and husband, Kirk Krack, to plant the devices. (Cruikshank recently broke her own world record by free-diving down to 88 meters and back in 2 min. 48 sec.) Both eagerly accepted the risky challenge.

"Good to go Mandy," crackled through the two-way. It was 3 a.m. The OPS support group on land had just completed a thermal-imaging sweep of the capture and killing coves. No security was detected. As the OPS van dropped the two off above the holding cove's small beach, and sped away, the free-diving pair, clad in wet suits, entered the water. The moon was full, helping them to see obstacles.

"Tensions were high . . . we had to get around a barbed-wire fence and hike down over some boulders to get into the water," Mandy said. "Then we swam around to the killing cove. It was about 40 feet (12 meters) deep. We had an underwater camera and hydrophone, and we used a flashlight to get a reference point so we knew where to retrieve them from after we made a reconnaissance, but we had to turn it on and off quickly to escape detection. Then Kirk and I put down the devices fairly easily."

On their return to the beach in the holding cove, Cruickshank said, "We saw a car going into the parking lot, so we hid in bushes until they left and then we waited for the van to pick us up."

Before that mission and again afterward, she said, "We were constantly monitored by police."

A few days later, Cruickshank said that from that same beach in the capture cove they saw a pod of 40 herded round to the killing cove, where the slaughter began. "They had separated the babies, some only as big as my arm, and then the emerald water in front of us began to turn red and you could hear the dolphins screaming. One stabbed dolphin tried to escape, and it made it over two nets from the killing cove and was heading toward the beach in the capture cove with blood streaming from it. We saw the last two breaths it took — it was impossible not to cry.

"The babies were led out to sea and were either killed or set free to die of starvation," she said.

Meanwhile, Psihoyos' team was embedded in their camera blinds on overlooking hillsides, sometimes for as long as 17 hours a day. Dressed in full camouflage gear and wearing face paint, they looked like military sniper teams. Black masking tape covered reflective surfaces on their cameras to avoid detection. For over 3 1/2 weeks, the OPS team survived on a daily ration of 3 hours' sleep. When filming from the camera blinds, they subsisted on energy bars and water. Whaler security men, always wary of outsiders monitoring their hunts, constantly scanned the high terrain, the bushes and undergrowth surrounding the two coves, their flashlights searching for intruders.

Psihoyos recounted his attempt in setting up the initial camera blind in a spot overlooking the killing cove.

"It was a moonless night and I had a full-size def (HD) camera in tow with a large tripod. I scaled a cliff and descended on a rope and perched on a shelf as big as an average office desk — but at a slope of about 30 degrees.

'grounded' after airport tantrum

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covertly inserted in the "killing cove" and extracted 16 times thanks to the efforts of the film's assistant director, Charles Hambleton, and three members of the OPS team. Their hidden, high-definition (HD) cameras successfully recorded the horror that unfolded behind Taiji's blue tarps. And what they saw was beyond their belief.

Captured dolphins were filmed writhing in pain as Taiji whalers speared them repeatedly or cracked their spines with spiked weapons. Stricken dolphins are also shown thrashing about wildly, blood pouring from their wounds until they finally succumbed. Meanwhile, a number of dolphin trainers and officials from the Taiji Whale Museum are shown cooperating in the slaughter — some even laughing — as the killing cove's bloodied, ruby-red water swept round into the adjacent capture cove.

But perhaps the most iconic scene is one in which a baby dolphin leaps to its death on the rocks after its mother is killed. This really was a surreal and incredibly sad sight to see.

OPS team leader Louie Psihoyos, a world-renowned photographer formerly with National Geographic Magazine, and members of his group, conducted the extraordinary covert operation with the daring elan and minute precision of a military-style, special-forces mission.

With funding from billionaire conservationist Clark, the team was able to use the most sophisticated equipment money could buy. Among their weapons of choice were a battery of HD cameras. Some of those cameras were encased in fake rocks sculpted out of high-density foam by movie-model makers with Kerner Optical (formerly George "Star Wars" Lucas' Industrial Light and Magic Shop). These disguised cameras were strategically positioned inside the killing cove.

Also included in the formidable lineup of high-tech gear for this covert operation were standard-size HD cameras, \$50,000 military-grade HD forward-looking infrared (FLIR) P-645 thermal cameras (to detect anyone the whalers had on lookout); hydrophones and HD underwater cameras (to record the dolphins' underwater throes); unmanned gyro-stabilized helicopters; a number of "shotgun" microphones disguised as tree branches; walkie-talkies; and a host of ancillary equipment.

The mission objective was to produce a well-balanced, full-length documentary feature for general worldwide release encompassing all facets of the Taiji dolphin cull and its health risks.

"We succeeded," Psihoyos said, "but we also came back with an epic horror film resembling a Steven King novel more than a documentary."

Psihoyos emphasized that the film is neither anti-Japanese nor a "Japan-bashing" production.

In fact, the whole OPS Taiji odyssey (with backing from Clark) began in the winter of 2006. Then, Psihoyos says, "My assistant director, Charles Hambleton, and I had a seven-hour meeting at the mayor's office with Taiji town officials about making a movie of their town.

"I braced my feet against a small tree and didn't move them for the next 15 1/2 hours," he said, adding, "the lagoon was filled with pilot whales — they made a protective circle around their young. I shot frantic clips from my unstable perch as I saw whales killed and dragged away."

Reacting to these brutal scenes, Psihoyos recalled thinking, "If there's a god, don't let their lives be wasted in vain."

Originally, OPS's hidden rock cameras focused on the killing cove from surrounding headlands could only film for three hours, but a high-tech piece of kit they acquired "turbocharged" the batteries to allow them to film for 11 hours continuously, ensuring they would capture all facets of the cull.

The hidden microphones revealed startling comments from whalers in the killing cove, including one during the cleanup after a killing session, when a dead calf was on the beach in the killing cove. Countering the whalers' contention they never harmed a mother or its calf, one was heard saying: "Hey, that guy over there saw the dead calf, didn't he? Is it a problem?" His friend responded, "He came from the [whalers'] union — it's not a problem."

Indeed, contrary to their statements, the Taiji whalers seem unconcerned about killing female dolphins and their calves — as is graphically depicted in one of the film's sequences.

However, along with the film's horrific images, Psihoyos also interviews on camera Japanese scientists and others involved in the mercury health issues surrounding dolphin meat.

Dr. Shigeo Ekino, a prominent researcher from Kumamoto University's Graduate School of Medical Sciences in Kyushu, compared the high mercury levels found in contaminated fish in Minamata, Japan, in the 1950s during the world's worst mercury-pollution disaster, to levels of mercury currently found in dolphin meat.

Ekino, who was filmed holding a tested sample of Taiji dolphin meat, said: "This dolphin meat is 98.9 ppm (parts per million of total mercury) — which is higher than the level (of the fish and shellfish) in Minamata Bay. It's a clear danger!"

His sample was 247.25 times the Japanese health ministry's advisory level of 0.4 ppm for total mercury.

Tetsuya Endo, a professor at Hokkaido's Health Science University, also conducted mercury tests on dolphin meat, and his results were published in 2005. In a filmed OPS interview, he said: "I found 100 ppm of total mercury in . . . bottlenose dolphin and 2,000 ppm of total mercury in the liver of an unknown (dolphin) species. All of it was toxic." In fact, the higher figure was 5,000 times the health ministry's advisory level for mercury.

In another OPS interview, Psihoyos asked Hideki Moronuki, deputy director of the Far Seas Fisheries Division of the central government's Fisheries Agency, "How are the dolphins killed now? . . . and are the dolphins being dragged around by their tails during the selection process for captive specimens?"

"An official, who represented Mayor Kazutaka Sangen, said they were concerned about Westerners showing blood in the cove — that it gave the town an evil look."

Psihoyos says he told the officials he would not show blood in his film — if they allowed him to position two cameras at the entrance to the cove and to interview the whalers. After mulling it over, though, both officials and whalers cut off contact with Psihoyos and denied him permission to film near the cove. As well, they demanded that he should restrict footage showing blood — apparently fearful that barbarous images may lead to their drive hunts being banned.

In this volatile atmosphere, local police warned the whalers and their supporters off any repeat of violence or threats of violence such as had happened before. In fact, Nigel Barker, a former Australian resident in Taiji, says he was threatened with bodily harm for providing The Japan Times with details of the whalers' brutal methods. In another incident, Psihoyos said he, too, was threatened by whalers, who said, "We will kill you."

Amazingly, though, after their talks broke down and the OPS people were leaving their final meeting with Taiji town officials, they were given a detailed map of Taiji, red-lining areas where filming was restricted. This map became a precious tool for planning the group's covert ops over the next year.

Now the gloves were off. No agreement had been made with the officials and Psihoyos immediately planned a thorough reconnaissance of the Taiji area. Precise vantage points were selected to position their cameras. Several camouflaged camera blinds were set up on the headland adjacent to the Whale Museum that overlooks the killing cove. But their major challenge was figuring out how to insert and extract their "rock cameras," underwater cameras, hydrophones and hidden microphones without being detected.

Psihoyos contacted Ric O'Barry, who captured and trained dolphins for the 1960s TV series "Flipper," asking for his help in detailing the whalers' routine during drive hunts.

O'Barry, head of the international Save Japan Dolphins coalition, had monitored the drives in Taiji for more than five years, and he agreed to be the point man for OPS. O'Barry was already hated by the whalers for his activities, including bringing the media to Taiji to film the brutal drives. In fact, he tells how whalers greet him with throat-cutting gestures when they see him there.

Following O'Barry's advice, the OPS group implemented their high-risk strategy for filming the covert mission. As the two headlands overlooking the killing cove were constantly monitored by whalers, members faced the loss of expensive gear and possible arrest. That was despite Japanese attorneys telling them that the legality of blocking access to a national park was questionable. They said, though, that police "made up their own rules" in enforcing the blockade.

Moronuki is filmed replying, "Fishermen are using specifically made knife (sic), and put it through the spine . . . most of the animals are killed instantly." As for allegations of them being dragged by their tails, he says, "That's not happening anymore."

When Psihoyos showed Moronuki a film clip of the inhumane, random spearing of dolphins while others were dragged by their tails — all filmed recently — he froze and told Psihoyos: "I have to instruct them again. They are using inappropriate method to treat dolphin."

At Psihoyos' request, Moronuki gave him a hair sample to be tested for mercury. The result: a readout of 5.874 ppm of total mercury, which is 14.68 times the health ministry's advisory level.

Moronuki's response was peculiar: "I was very happier to know that I have eaten so much fish which make me much healthier than meat-eating peoples."

Another dramatic highlight of the footage shows a surfer invasion in Taiji last October led by legendary Australian pro surfer Dave Rastovich, along with a few TV celebrities and some surfer buddies. They paddled into the cove where dolphins were being slaughtered and formed a prayer circle. Shocked by the atrocity, they finally retreated when whalers in skiffs came and prodded them with poles and sharp-hooked gaffs.

Producers of the OPS documentary are aiming for a worldwide release in June, including a special Japanese version creatively marketed and circulated to ensure maximum viewing even if major distributors turn it down. The film's narrator will be an actor selected from Hollywood's "A list," they said.

Referring to his hopes the film will benefit the dolphins, Psihoyos said: "Dolphins are the only wild animals known to rescue humans. With this film, we'd like to come to their rescue and, in the process, save ourselves."

Pointedly, just months before the surfers went into the killing cove at Taiji, their leader Dave Rastovich had survived a shark attack in Australia when a dolphin swam between him and the shark and allowed him to escape.

SOURCE - The Japan Times

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