

Research Activity Report
Supported by “Leading Graduate Program in Primatology and Wildlife Science”
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2017. 06. 05	
Affiliation/Position	Primate Research Institute/D3
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1. Country/location of visit
Kyoto University, North Campus, Science Seminar House, Kyoto, Japan
2. Research project
‘The Cove’ and ‘Behind The Cove’ documentary screenings and discussion (Conserv’Session)
3. Date (departing from/returning to Japan)
2017. 06. 03 - 2017. 06. 03 (one day)
4. Main host researcher and affiliation
Cécile Sarabian (Primate Research Institute, Kyoto University)
5. Progress and results of your research/activity (You can attach extra pages if needed)
Please insert one or more pictures (to be publicly released). Below each picture, please provide a brief description.
<p>Introduction: The Cove is a 2009 documentary film directed by Louie Psihogios and follows the controversial annual dolphin drive hunt in the town of Taiji, Wakayama Prefecture, Japan. In this specially extended ‘Conserv’Session’, we watched a screening of The Cove, followed by an opposing documentary film ‘Behind The Cove: The Quiet Japanese Speak Out!’ (2015) directed by Ms. Keiko Yagi. After watching both films we listened to a short presentation by PhD Student Ms. Mi-Yeon Kim (Kyoto University Wildlife Research Center) on Cetacean Cognition. This was followed by a panel discussion with Ms. Yagi, in support of the hunt, Mr. Tim Burns via video conference (The Dolphin Project member and ‘Cove Monitor’ whose purpose is to document and report on the ongoing hunt in Taiji) in opposition to the hunt, and Dr. Fumitaka Wakamatsu, a Kyoto University research administrator who wrote his PhD thesis on ‘The Making of Scientific Whaling in Japan: Ecology, Science, and Cultural Nationalism’ and acted as a commentator.</p> <p>The Cove: Although I have watched The Cove before, I tried to look more critically at the film this time. The most persuasive arguments against hunting dolphins were their intelligence and communicative abilities, graphic footage of the actual hunt and slaughter, and the alleged high levels of mercury contained in dolphin meat which is harmful to human health. However, the film also appealed to peoples’ emotions and was at times anthropomorphic. For example, stories of a dolphin which “committed suicide” because it was in captivity, and a dolphin which “rescued” a surfer by knocking into a shark are anecdotal and lack evidence to support the perceived intentions behind these behaviours. In addition, the film involved secret filming of the hunt, which undoubtedly led to mistrust between the activists and the people of Taiji. However, it is difficult to see how footage of the hunt could have been obtained in any other way. Also, in Behind The Cove, Mr. Ric O’Barry (the main activist in The Cove) regretted not including more of the Japanese perspective in the film. Overall, I agree with exposing the dolphin hunt to the rest of the world.</p> <p>Behind The Cove: This was my first time to watch Behind The Cove. The main themes running through the film were: the long history of whale hunting in Japan, America’s aggression towards Japan during the Second World War, e.g. the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the view that Japanese people should be bolder in resisting outside pressure from the West. The film did feature interviews with members of the conservationist organisation Sea Shepherd; portraying them as non-violent and interested in having a constructive dialogue with the Japanese people. However, my overall impression was that the film was nationalistic, and mostly reflected the opinions of older Japanese men, which are not necessarily representative of the whole Japanese population. Rather than addressing the specific issues with the dolphin hunt in Taiji, the director appears to have mistakenly interpreted The Cove as a personal attack on the Japanese people.</p>

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Cetacean Cognition presentation: The relative brain size, brain complexity and intelligence of dolphins and other cetaceans was highlighted. I was surprised to learn that the dolphin brain has more cortical folds than the human brain. I was particularly interested to find out that the technique for killing the dolphins at Taiji has been modified since The Cove was released. A sharp instrument is stabbed into the dolphins, behind their blow hole, to paralyse them. However, death is not instantaneous, as is often claimed. The hole created by the instrument is then plugged with a cork, so that the blood remains inside the body while the dolphin dies, presumably by drowning. I asked Ms. Kim whether this is for aesthetic reasons, i.e. so that human observers do not become upset at seeing blood in the water. She confirmed that this is indeed the case, as there are no other physiological or welfare reasons for plugging the hole. I find this approach to addressing the issue of the inhumane killing of dolphins in Taiji to be superficial and deceptive.

Panel Discussion: The audience showed great interest in the topic, and the discussion was extended by one hour. It covered many different aspects of dolphin and whale hunting including: history, war, economics, conservation and the environment. During the discussion I asked Ms. Yagi whether she has ever discussed with the Taiji officials the possibility of turning the dolphin hunting business into a dolphin watching business. She replied that she had never discussed this with them, but that dolphin watching was worse for welfare than dolphin hunting due to the noise and disruption caused by boats and tourists. I struggled to understand how watching dolphins in the wild was worse for their welfare than capturing and killing them, or transporting them to aquariums around the world. Dr. Wakamatsu added that Taiji is in a remote location and it would be difficult to reliably locate the dolphins in the sea, which I thought was a more sensible answer.

Conclusion: Overall, I found this session very interesting and thought-provoking. It was a good opportunity to compare two films with opposing views on this controversial subject. Unfortunately, Ms. Yagi, the director of Behind The Cove, has chosen to counter what she views as a biased documentary with her own biased documentary, and missed the opportunity to construct a more balanced and convincing argument in response to The Cove. I am also concerned that, as Behind The Cove is currently the only Japanese film made in response to The Cove, the international community may mistake the nationalistic views expressed in the film as representative of the Japanese people, which would likely reflect negatively on Japan.

Personally, I am against dolphin and whale hunting, as these animals are highly likely to feel pain and distress during capture, slaughter, and when they are transported to and kept in aquariums. Behind The Cove failed to address this issue, and I remain in support of stopping the Taiji hunt.

6. Others: Photographs



The Cove (Left) and Behind The Cove (Right) Posters



Ms. Keiko Yagi (Center), Mr. Tim Burns (Large screen) and Dr. Fumitaka Wakamatsu (Right)