

Reaching out

Tension seemed to build and police became more and more nervous. They were hoping we would not even go to Takababe hill, our observation point next to the killing cove in Taiji on Saturday, during the drive hunt happening that morning. When would the Japanese nationalists arrive in town? Police expected some 50 to 100 right wing nationalists to come to the Taiji whaling festival for that weekend. The nationalists announced they would demonstrate against and look for activists, whom they call “eco-terrorists”. Well, we are far from anything like that, but nationalists would be unlikely to make a distinction between us and other, perhaps more radical groups.

Concern increased and so did the number of police on the ground, already in the course of Friday (October 30th). They kept a close eye on us during our visit to the Taiji Whale Museum that afternoon, but things kept quiet and the only thing that stuck with us once again was the sadness and bizarreness of the place, filled with captive cetaceans, caught in atrocious drive hunts, having to perform for people. While we could leave and come time and again, we would always see the same sad animals in the same tiny tanks and pens, year after year, unless they had died or been sold to some other sad place and replaced.

The rest of Saturday we took the advice of police seriously and stayed away from Taiji, avoiding marches of the radical nationalists who were actively searching for activists. We kept waiting way into Sunday and became a bit impatient, as police seemed to not want us over at Taiji at all for the whole weekend. We made it clear that we were not going to hide in the hotel and made our way over to Taiji shortly after noon, escorted by two police vehicles with five officers.

Finally around 1.30pm police informed us that the nationalists had left Taiji harbor, where the festival took place. All of a sudden we could walk into an area that had been heavily guarded and seemingly off-limits until moments before. It was strange – just a festival going on, hunting boats parading, taking people on rides and lining up at the harbor, decorated with colorful flags, allowing us to approach those boats closer than ever. People seemed to have fun, there were all kinds of performances, dances, music, candy thrown – a festival that could take place on the countryside anywhere in the world.

We were stunned; not a single person acted hostile – in fact many treated us really friendly; we felt almost welcome. It was peaceful, fun actually. All of this made us realize: in some ways we are so close to resolution! Taiji is a beautiful place with friendly people, surrounded by majestic cultural heritage, nature and coastline. Perfectly fit for tourism. What potential... What if the dolphin hunting and whaling boats were filled with happy people watching whales and dolphins out at sea? After all Taiji loves dolphins and whales, right? On a more personal level we even had a friendly encounter and handshake with a dolphin hunter, with whom there had been a far less friendly encounter some years before.

All of this left us hopeful. We felt clearly that it does make sense for Cove Monitors to be on the ground in Taiji, telling the World what is going on, but also reaching out for resolution and reconciliation; for ways out of the present dilemma without anybody

losing face. With these positive feelings we left Taiji to retreat to the beautiful World Heritage Site of Koyasan, to recover and meditate before our return to Europe. It has become clear once more: We cannot end the dolphin hunt. Only the Japanese can. But we can be there and reach out, facilitate and co-operate rather than confront, so the dolphin hunt will end rather sooner than later.

Hans Peter Roth and Marna Olsen

