

## Commentary

*The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute of Cetacean Research*

# The establishment of a new research hub of the Institute of Cetacean Research in Taiji: meeting science with 400 years of whaling tradition

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In April 2024, the Institute of Cetacean Research (ICR) established a new research facility in Taiji Town, Wakayama Prefecture, the ICR Taiji Office. The ICR Taiji Office is situated within the newly completed International Cetacean Center (ICC), located at an elevation of over 80 meters above sea level making it less vulnerable to tsunamis, and has advanced research laboratories (Figure 1). The ICC spans approximately 1,880 square meters and has a reference library comprising over 30,000 volumes, multiple conference rooms, and a 90-seat lecture hall, all of which are accessible to the public. The ICR Taiji Office is equipped with laboratories for genetic, chemical, and biological analyses. It also features a wet laboratory, specimen and storage rooms. Yet, the significance of this establishment could extend far beyond the scientific infrastructure.

Why should one of Japan's foremost research institutes have chosen to embed itself in Taiji Town—a small coastal town of fewer than 3,000 residents and of 5.81 square kilometers, one of the smallest in Japan? This article attempts to explain the reasons behind the establishment of the ICR Taiji Office. At the start, we would like to state that the ICR Taiji Office can be identified as a site where science and cultural traditions intersect, highlighting the role of diversity—biological, cultural, and epistemic—in shaping more inclusive approaches to sustainable resource management.

## The rationale for establishing the ICR Taiji Office

Taiji is known as the birthplace of traditional Japanese whaling some 400 years ago. Whaling continues to be the main activity of the town in practice. The relationship between Taiji Town and the ICR can be traced back to the preparatory period for the establishment of the Taiji Whale Museum in the 1970s, when Professor Masaharu Nishiwaki and Dr. Seiji Ohsumi contributed to its foundation by organizing biological specimens and strengthening its scientific resources at the town's re-

quest. Following this, ICR experts continued to provide academic advice on cetacean research in Taiji, building a foundation of scientific cooperation between the ICR and the town. A key moment in the evolution of this relationship came in 2011, however, when the marine station of the ICR located in Ayukawa, Miyagi Prefecture was extensively damaged by the Great East Japan Earthquake and subsequent tsunamis that affected mainly the north-eastern Japan. The earthquake and tsunamis swept away research instruments and equipment, as well as whale tissue samples stored at the marine station, making continued operation of the station impossible. At that time, Taiji Town generously offered provisional facilities to the ICR, which marked the beginning of further development to a long-term relationship, aligned with Taiji's broader initiative to cultivate an academic identity—evolving from 'catch and consume' to 'display and educate' and, ultimately, to 'learn and research'.

While the establishment of the ICR Taiji Office originated in part from contingency, it may ultimately be seen as symbolic move to locate the research facility in a place that embodies the potential intersection between science and whaling tradition. This may not only represent a rational choice but also carry symbolic significance in linking the history of whaling with contemporary scientific knowledge, bridging accumulated experience with formal scientific understanding.

## Enhancing conservation through sustainable use of whale resources based on science

One of the main aims of the ICR is to carry out scientific research on marine mammals to facilitate sound stock assessment. In this way, the sustainability in the use of some whale species is ensured. ICR and its researchers have carried out national whale research programs both in the western North Pacific (JARNP/JARPNII, NEWREP-NP) and the Antarctic (JARPA/JARP-II, NEWREP-A, JASS-A). ICR also collaborate in international whale research



Figure 1. External view of the International Cetacean Center (ICC) where the Institute of Cetacean Research Taiji Office is situated (top left); central hall of the ICC (top right); chemical laboratory (bottom left); lecture hall (bottom right).

initiatives such as the IWC POWER program in the North Pacific. These research programs are conducted to obtain the samples and data necessary for stock assessment, and for understanding the role of whales in the ecosystem. These long-term programs, though carried out beyond Taiji, constitute the core scientific foundation underpinning the resource-assessment research and initiatives currently being advanced in Taiji, grounded in decades of evidence-based practice.

The establishment of ICR Taiji Office has, therefore, the potential to further enhance the use of cetacean resources in the town under the sustainability principle. The sustainable use of biodiversity has been clearly articulated in international frameworks that Japan has endorsed. For example, Article 10 on sustainable use and Article 8(j) on traditional knowledge of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) stated that *'Today our only option is to manage productivity and resources in a sustainable manner, reducing waste wherever possible, using the principles of adaptive management, and taking into account traditional knowledge which contributes to the maintenance of ecosystem services'*. Also, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS),

emphasizes the integration of traditional knowledge and scientific management in resource governance.

By upholding scientific accountability based on evidence, it may become possible to move beyond emotional conflict and foster constructive international dialogue. The integration of Taiji's sustainability practices with the science of ICR can transcend the binary of 'use versus preservation', offering a practical framework for resource governance that aligns with major international organizations and agreements. Within this global legal and policy architecture, the ICR can be positioned as a scientific institution that supports sustainable resource management and international dialogue.

The enduring legacy of Taiji's sustainable use and resilience continues to shape the community's ethos today. These initiatives built an empirical foundation for sustainable use, but their significance in context of sustainability itself was often dismissed internationally. Despite this, both the ICR and this small town continued their missions quietly. The establishment of ICR Taiji Office may be seen as this intersection of these parallel efforts—tradition and science, local and global perspectives, past and future. It represents a commitment to transcend polarized

debates and work toward a shared vision of coexistence. The whaling issues are highly complex and located at the huge intersection of history, politics, culture, ethics, human rights and environment. As Hamlet once questioned whether to endure or to act, humanity too faces a choice in how it responds to these complex challenges. Science can act as a guiding torch, illuminating common ground and fostering constructive dialogue.

### **Vision and outlook of the ICR**

Leveraging both the Tokyo Office and the well-equipped Taiji Office, the ICR aims to achieve greater efficiency in cetacean research and stock assessments. In particular, the Taiji Office will further advance experimental research through its laboratory capacity, thereby strengthening scientific foundations of the ICR. Simultaneously, as a scientific center, the ICR recognizes its responsibility

to engage actively in educational and outreach activities for residents including children and students. It is also committed to pursuing the mission of passing on to the next generation the significance of cetacean diversity, the marine ecosystem around Japan, cetacean science, and whale-based food culture. Furthermore, by fostering collaboration with international research institutions and advancing global research on the sustainable use and conservation of cetaceans, the ICR aspires to serve as a hub that shares scientific achievements and insights with the world for sustainability of both human and marine resources.

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