

Die in peace and come back again: Meaning of memorial services for fish in resource management in Japan

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More attention has been paid for marine biodiversity conservation for the last decade. For example, the number of marine commercial species such as sharks and sea horses listed in the CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna) Appendices I and II, which indicate they are either endangered or threatened, have increased since 2003. Sea cucumber is one of the wild animals that is under hot debate at CITES conferences. It has been one of the important coastal resources for at least 400 years among maritime Asian countries, whose main market has been exclusively China. However, the growing demand for sea cucumber in China has raised high concerns over conservation. A “Sea cucumber war” in Galapagos Is., Ecuador, occurred in 1995 and provides a good example. This event opened a controversial debate on sea cucumber conservation at the CITES meeting in 2002. Even after the CITES was enacted, the market continued to grow, and prices of sea cucumber in the world have continued to rise since then. After drawing an overall picture of the sea cucumber industry, the paper will present some case studies illustrating how fishermen and related stakeholders cope with the “sea cucumber bubble” in Japan. In particular, the paper will describe a case study of a memorial service for sea cucumber in Noto, central Japan, which has a long history of sea cucumber fisheries and sea cucumber products such as fermented intestines and dried gonad. This memorial ceremony was begun exclusively for sea cucumber in 2010. The ceremony can function as a symbol for synthesizing all kinds of efforts that different stakeholders such as the local government, fisheries association, and the processors’ association invest for resource management. Finally, the paper analyzes characteristics of Noto’s example through other memorial services for fish and marine animals commonly practiced throughout Japanese archipelagos.