CELEBRATING EXTINCTION?
The Disconnect Between Reality and Media Representation of Bluefin Tuna in Japan
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**ABSTRACT**

The Japanese media has perpetually glorified Bluefin tuna as the symbol of Japanese culture, cuisine, and national identity. Meanwhile, Bluefin tuna stocks are plummeting due to overfishing, and some species are international recognized as endangered. Blame is primarily placed on Japan, as the nation consumes 80% of Bluefin in the world and the government has admitted to overfishing several times. This has led to international environmental organizations and Western governments continually criticizing Japan for its unsustainable fishing practices.

This paper provides an explanation as to why there is no domestic movement within Japan to put an end to overfishing: the Japanese media. The Japanese media glorifies Bluefin tuna fishing and consumption, while neglecting both domestic and international criticisms of the fishing industry. By erasing the environmental discourse and presenting Bluefin only as a celebratory and culturally symbolic fish, the Japanese public remains widely unaware of depleted stocks. Furthermore, there is no academic consensus within Japan concerning the stock status of Bluefin tuna, regardless of international scientific consensus that they are endangered. With little awareness of the issue and difficulty in accessing unbiased information, a domestic anti-overfishing movement is unlikely to occur.
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**INTRODUCTION**

In 2006, the Australian Fisheries Management Authority (AFMA) accused Japan of harvesting up to three times its legal quota for Southern Bluefin Tuna over the course of twenty years. Japan’s quota under the Commission for the Conservation of Southern Bluefin Tuna (CCSBT) fluctuated around 6,000 tons, and Australia claimed that the Japan Fisheries Agency (JFA)\(^1\) was annually harvesting 12,000 to 20,000 tons. The managing director of the AFMA aggressively accused Japan of taking “2 billion dollars worth of fish from the international community.”\(^2\) In response, the JFA agreed to halve its existing quota to approximately 3,000 tons for at least five years starting in 2007; a tacit admission of two decades of overfishing.\(^3\)

In the wake of such scandals, outsiders paint Japan as criminally negligent for its unsustainable fishing practices. International environmental organizations have claimed some Bluefin species as endangered, advocating for stronger restrictions. Some have stated that Bluefin “deserve to stand with the white rhino and the mountain gorilla as a species under our protection.”\(^4\) In response, hundreds of headlines painted across Western\(^5\) newspapers and websites include,

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1. The Japan Fisheries Agency (JFA) is a government body that manages all fishing and whaling practices in Japan, and works closely with a privately owned umbrella organization known as the Japan Fisheries cooperative (JF) that actually carries out fishing practices. The JFA is a branch of the Japanese federal government’s Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries.
5. In this paper, I will broadly refer to the *West* as English-speaking nations including the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand.
“Japan: Dancing on the Grave of Bluefin Tuna,”\textsuperscript{6} “‘Tuna’s End,’”\textsuperscript{7} and “Endangered Species Status Sought for Bluefin Tuna.”\textsuperscript{8} Most of these articles place blame on Japan as the main culprit for severely depleted tuna stocks. This blame is inevitable: Japan consumes 80 percent of Bluefin tuna in the world\textsuperscript{9} and is the largest Bluefin importer. Most importantly, the government is infamous for admitting to overfishing while being reluctant to implement more sustainable fishing methods.\textsuperscript{10}

This paper aims to shed light on one of the most crucial factors that have caused Japan’s failure to implement sustainable fishing policies: the Japanese media. Newspapers, popular television, magazines, and academic books have provided conflicting and skewed information to the Japanese public. For example, in 2012, the International Scientific Committee for Tuna and Tuna-like Species in the North Pacific Ocean (ISC) released a scientific assessment stating Pacific Bluefin tuna populations have plummeted to a catastrophic 3.6 percent of its original population due to overfishing.\textsuperscript{11} This received negligible press coverage in Japan: the Yomiuri Shinbun, Japan’s largest newspaper, published a brief and alarmingly positive perception of the scientific assessment. The article danced around stock projections and neglected to mention the rate at which overfishing had occurred. Furthermore, it ended on a positive note, claiming that Japan was

\textsuperscript{6} Rigney, Dancing on the Grave.
\textsuperscript{9} Rigney, Dancing on the Grave.
\textsuperscript{11} Stock Assessment of Pacific Bluefin Tuna in 2012. 2012. International Scientific Committee for Tuna and Tuna-Like Species in the North Pacific Ocean: 44.
“able to avoid a large decrease in catch quota” and therefore being able to steer clear of a national increase in tuna price.\textsuperscript{12} This is only one example of the thousands of articles in the Japanese media that have failed to criticize the JFA.

In this paper, I will provide insight into the multitude of factors that play into the Japanese public perception of Bluefin tuna fishing. There is a lack of awareness in the public regarding overfishing due to the failings of the Japanese media to present accurate and unbiased information. The Japanese media glorifies Bluefin tuna fishing and consumption, meanwhile neglecting both domestic and international criticisms of the fishing industry. The media has erased the environmental discourse, presenting Bluefin tuna only as a celebratory and culturally symbolic fish. Further, academics are not in agreement about the threat to Bluefin. This lack of scholarly consensus further confuses the Japanese public. With little awareness of the issue and difficulty in accessing accurate information, a domestic anti-overfishing movement is unlikely to occur. However, a domestic movement is vital in order to change the fisheries regime of the nation; environmental organizations and Western governments have failed to mobilize the Japanese public by neglecting the cultural significance of Bluefin tuna and the associated problems of media manipulation in Japan.

\textbf{THE HISTORY AND CULTURE OF BLUEFIN TUNA}

Although it is now the ubiquitous symbol of Japanese cuisine, Bluefin tuna only became popular in the 1970s. Tuna was nearly worthless worldwide

\textsuperscript{12} Foster, Malcolm. 2013. “Japan's bluefin tuna is disappearing, but few chefs fear shortage.” \textit{The Huffington Post} (02/28/2013), \url{http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/02/28/bluefin-tuna-disappearing-japan_n_2779577.html}.  

several decades ago.\textsuperscript{13} Sushi was served as a street snack in Tokyo during the nineteenth century; it was one of the earliest forms of fast food, well before the term was used for burgers and fries.\textsuperscript{14} Japanese preferred lean fish, therefore Bluefin tuna’s fattiness was not favored. This fattiness causes tuna to spoil quickly, and therefore it was referred to as \textit{neko matagi}, or “fish that even a cat would disdain.”\textsuperscript{15} However, during the post-World War II U.S. occupation of Japan, the nation began to westernize rapidly: the national diet shifted to fattier, red meats and became more accepting of strong flavors. This paved the way for the acceptance of tuna in Japan.\textsuperscript{16}

The national shift towards a more Westernized diet coincided with a large influx of tuna into the nation due to the development of long-distance fishing boats in the 1950s. Factory fleets implemented processing and freezing facilities on board, making it possible to catch fish in distant waters. In the 1960s, the development of -60 degrees Celsius flash freezing technology allowed tuna to be transported fresh around the world.

The new technologies, combined with changing palettes, sparked the integration of Bluefin tuna into Japanese culture and identity.\textsuperscript{17} Over the course of two decades beginning in the 1970s, the average price paid to Bluefin tuna

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\item Bland, \textit{From Cat Food to Sushi Counter}.
\item Issenberg, \textit{World Gone Raw}, xxi
\item Issenberg, \textit{World Gone Raw}, xiii
\end{thebibliography}
fishermen rose by 10,000 percent. Today, Bluefin tuna is the “trophy fish.” It is the most demanded at any sushi restaurant, “a benchmark of a restaurant’s merit.” Bluefin tuna is glorified as the symbol of Japanese cuisine, resulting in such inconceivable prices. A single fish sells for an average of 10,000 dollars, and the most expensive Bluefin ever sold was 1.76 million in 2013.

The celebration of Bluefin marks a postwar resurgence of cultural and economic nationalism in Japan. After Japan was defeated in 1945, the nation suffered from a crisis of identity. Many Japanese still oppose any representation of the national flag, as well as the national anthem, as it evokes wartime memory and is seen as a celebration of militarism and imperialism. With political nationalism becoming taboo, the public was thirsty for a new vehicle of patriotism. Economic and cultural nationalism quickly took over. It is no surprise that the celebration of Bluefin tuna began during the resurgence of economic and cultural nationalism—it is the non-contentious symbol of Japan with close ties to both the culinary culture and economy of the country.

This fish serves as the glorified symbol of Japanese cuisine in both international and domestic landscapes. In the international realm, Japanese media outlets advertise Bluefin as a product that has conquered the world due to the

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18 Issenberg, *World Gone Raw*, xii
19 Issenberg, *World Gone Raw*, xii
globalization of sushi culture creating a monstrous global demand for tuna.\textsuperscript{24} On the other hand, in the domestic realm, Bluefin tuna is the most important aspect of sushi, a cuisine that represents the delicate flavors of Japanese food and the mastery of Japanese chefs. Such cultural significance fueled rapid domestic demand for the fish, creating a “gold-rush mentality” in fishing grounds across the globe where Bluefin tuna is found.\textsuperscript{25} Bluefin is of highest demand in Japan; and with high demand came harsh consequences to the species.

\section*{The Ecology and Endangered Status of Bluefin Tuna}

Overfishing of Bluefin tuna species may have far-reaching effects to oceanic ecosystems because they are apex predators.\textsuperscript{26} Bluefin tuna consume a wide variety of fish, including herring, anchovies, sardines, mackerel, etc. According to a report by the World Wildlife Fund, the depletion of Bluefin tuna will have “unpredictable cascading effects” in oceanic ecosystems and serious consequences to many species in the food chain.\textsuperscript{27}

The depletion of Bluefin stocks may severely impact oceanic ecosystems also because they are so widespread; their superior biological processes have allowed them to thrive in a wide range of habitats. Bluefin tuna are one of the largest and fastest fish on the planet. They may swim up to 40 miles per hour when hunting, and have been documented to dive 3,000 feet below surface. They

\textsuperscript{25} Bestor, \textit{How Sushi Went Global}, 58.
\textsuperscript{26} Apex predators reside at or near the top of the food chain (for example, wolves and hawks are apex predators of terrestrial ecosystems), therefore an acute change in apex predator population often affects all other organisms under them.
\textsuperscript{27} Kiger, Patrick J. \textit{Bluefin tuna 101}. in National Geographic [database online]. 20142014. Available from \url{http://channel.nationalgeographic.com/channel/wicked-tuna/articles/bluefin-tuna-101/}. 
may become as long as 10 feet and weigh up to one ton. This fish can also tolerate extreme changes in water temperature because they are warm blooded—a rare trait among fish—which allows them to migrate far distances, making them one of the most wide-ranging fishes in the world.

Bluefin tuna is a common term used for three different large, fast-swimming, transboundary migratory species: Atlantic Bluefin Tuna, Pacific Bluefin Tuna, and the Southern Bluefin Tuna. The Atlantic and Pacific Bluefin may be categorized as subspecies of a larger group referred to as Northern Bluefin Tuna. Within each species, there are several different stocks around the world with differing migratory paths.

Atlantic Bluefin tuna are native to both the western and eastern Atlantic Ocean, as well as the Mediterranean Ocean. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species has categorized this fish as Endangered (EN), due to a global decline of at least 51% over the past three generation lengths, which is 39 years. The International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) works as the inter-governmental body that conducts research and provides a forum for international management procedures.

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28 Kiger, Bluefin Tuna 101.
31 Thunnus thynnus in IUCN Red List.
Pacific Bluefin tuna are native to the Pacific Ocean, with a more concentrated population in the Northern Pacific. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species categorized this species as Least Concern (LC).\textsuperscript{33}

Southern Bluefin Tuna are found only in the Southern hemisphere, from the Southern Indian Ocean to the South Pacific. They migrate from the waters south of Java, Indonesia, where they spawn, to Australia, New Zealand, and Southern Africa. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species categorized the Southern Bluefin as Critically Endangered (CR).\textsuperscript{34} The Commission for the Conservation of Southern Bluefin Tuna (CCSBT) works as the intergovernmental body that conducts research and provides a forum for international management measures.\textsuperscript{35} Although Southern Bluefin stocks have been severely depleted, the 2011 stock assessment by the CCSBT claimed that stock is “expected to increase at current catch levels.”\textsuperscript{36}

**Research Methodology**

My research methodologies include analysis of written, visual, and cultural texts as well as qualitative research through participant-observation and interviews. I investigated the complex cultural and political factors that play into the representation of the Japanese fishing industry by analyzing the discourses and narratives in a wide-ranging set of written and visual texts, including

government statements, policy documents, conservation literature, popular Japanese television programs, and Western documentaries. I conducted my research by analyzing primary and secondary sources in both Japanese and English in order to reveal the inconsistencies in published data and the differing cultural and political perspectives. I further conducted a literature review that reveals conflicting accounts of the status of Bluefin in Japanese academic publications.

Cultural texts, such as journalism and television, present a number of narratives regarding the fishing industry in Japan. The first is the glorification of tuna fishing and consumption in Japan that repeatedly excludes an environmental perspective. This narrative reveals the complex ties between Japanese national identity and Bluefin tuna. The second is published articles (primarily news articles) in Japan that fail to present a negative or critical analysis of Japanese fishing practices and scandals that are related to overfishing. This makes obvious a form of censorship and media manipulation. The third narrative is Western environmental texts vilifying Japan as homogenous and unsustainable, which represents the Western environmental perspective that is exerting political pressures onto the Japanese government. The fourth is the outright rejection of scientific data by Japanese scholars, as well as the others that are outraged by this irrational rejection. This reveals the conflicting discourses within Japan regarding overfishing.

Most of the information I present in my first chapter is from my experiences at Oma, Aomori, in January 2014. I conducted in-depth,
conversational interviews of representatives from the Oma Fishermen’s Cooperative, Oma Tourism Association, and Oma’s local government office. See attached appendix for sample questions. I followed IRB guidelines to conduct my research and protect the privacy of the residents of Oma.

**Chapter Summary**

In my thesis, I will argue that the Japanese media has failed to present unbiased information and has instead celebrated a fish that may be headed towards extinction. I break this down into three chapters: “Public Discourse: Oma, The *Town of Tuna*,” “Manipulation in the Media: Censorship and Skewed Public Perception,” and “Academic Discourse: Challenging Science.”

The first chapter offers a case study of Oma, a town in northern Japan that is presented by the media as the “Town of Tuna.” Oma portrays the disconnect between reality and the information presented by Japanese television. The town has successfully branded its fish under the name of the village in order to maximize prices; the Oma brand advertises the masculinity of their fishermen and their traditional fishing methods. While the town is well known for its high quality fish, most do not know it is one of the poorest towns in Japan, struggling from depleted fish stocks. Many fishermen have publicly spoken out against industrial fishing. However, their voices are rarely heard in the media.

The second chapter focuses on the manipulation of public perception in Japan, examining political censorship and media glorification of the fishing industry. The JFA takes advantage of a Japanese journalism system known as *kisha clubs* in order to make data inaccessible to the public. The Japanese fishing industry has also deflected blame for depleted stocks by perpetuating the concept
of sakana banare, a term used to address the decline of the fishing industry by placing blame on Japanese consumers eating less fish. I conclude this chapter by expanding on the concept of culinary nationalism—the phenomena of Japanese media perpetually presenting Bluefin tuna consumption as a cultural practice superior to the rest of the world. This celebration of cuisine, along with the censorship of the JFA and the fishing businesses deflecting blame from themselves, created a skewed public perception of the ecological consequences of Bluefin consumption.

The final chapter discusses the lack of consensus about overfishing among Japanese academics and how this conflicting information is delivered to the public. I focus on two Japanese books that contest the environmental perspective: Yuji Uozumi’s Are Tuna Endangered? (マグロは絶滅危惧種か) which questions environmental organizations’ categorization of Bluefin species as endangered, and Tuna War (マグロ戦争) by Gunji Sadanori, which rejects Bluefin stock projections.

In my conclusion, I observe that an anti-overfishing movement has yet to spark in Japan despite relentless international pressures. I argue that it is crucial to investigate the Japanese media and public perception of the issue in order to mobilize the Japanese public to protect Bluefin tuna, not only as an environmental asset, but a cultural symbol of Japan. The overfishing of Bluefin tuna has affected the world in unquantifiable ways, from endless international conflicts between nations to local Japanese fishermen scraping by to support their families. It has had cascading effects to the intricate global and domestic network of politics,
economics, environment, and culture. Mobilizing a Japanese anti-overfishing movement is essential in order to prevent further overfishing and damage.
CHAPTER 1
PUBLIC DISCOURSE: OMA, THE “TOWN OF TUNA”

In January 2013, Tokyo’s Tsukiji fish market sold a single 222-kilogram Bluefin tuna for a record breaking 155.4 million yen; in US dollars, that is approximately 1.76 million. One kilogram was worth about 8,000 dollars, making the meat of this fish roughly eight times the price of pure silver. This occurred at the annual new year auction known as hatsuseri (初競り), where owners of mega-franchise sushi restaurants from all over the world congregate in Tokyo to bid on the first tuna sold that year. It is an annual ritual at Tsukiji for the first tuna to be sold at an unimaginable price; tuna buyers do this to bring in good luck and fortune to their businesses and their families, but more importantly, it stirs up global media frenzy and provides a type of exposure that is otherwise difficult to acquire.

The 1.76 million dollar tuna came from Oma, a small fishing town 350 kilometers north of Tokyo. Oma is well known because Japanese media outlets regularly promote it as the glorious “Town of Tuna.” These media outlets talk about the town using language colored in pride and honor—providing “the world’s best Bluefin tuna,” they say. This has allowed Oma to serve as the national symbol of best-quality, high-end Japanese cuisine by providing the most

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37 Boehler, *World’s Most Expensive Fish.*
38 Boehler, *World’s Most Expensive Fish.*
39 It is important to note that the 1.76 million dollar tuna was an anomaly, as most hatsuseri Oma Bluefin go for between 200,00 and 800,000 dollars, and about 10,000 dollars outside of the hatsuseri ritual: still, an impressive price for a single fish.
expensive tuna to the global fish market. In order to figure out what all the hype was about, I visited the town in January 2014.

The town was not what I imagined it to be. Because it is one of the most famous towns in Japan, I expected a train would take me straight there from Tokyo. However, it takes a lot of effort to get there. The town is located on the most northern tip of Honshu, the main island of Japan. The fastest way to get there from Tokyo was to fly past the town to Hokkaido, the island north of Honshu. From there, I took a bus to the nearest ferry terminal and hopped on one of only two ferry rides per day from Hokkaido to Oma. The entire trip was approximately six hours long.

I imagined the town would be packed with bustling sushi restaurants and tourist hotspots, marketing the freshest fish in the country. At first glance, however, Oma is no different than any other fishing town in Japan. The town is small and all the houses have a traditional Japanese design. The town consists of one grocery store, a post office, and a couple restaurants here and there, which never seem to be open. I found myself disappointed with the village at first. After spending time observing the community however, I began to realize that Oma’s uniqueness lies not within extravagant factors, but in its subtleties: the small town has close ties to the multi-million dollar fishing industry of Japan.

On my fifth day, I was walking through a small street on the way back to my hotel, and noticed two young men dressed in suits drunkenly stumble out of a residential home. Oma’s population is under six thousand and most work in the local fishing or seaweed harvesting industry, it is thus unusual to see anybody in
business attire.\footnote{青森県大間町 [Aomori prefecture, oma]. (2014). , 2013, from http://www.town.ooma.lg.jp/} That is, unless businessmen of large fishery corporations from Tokyo’s Tsukiji fish market come to strike a deal with Bluefin tuna fishermen. I then noticed that the home they walked out of was massive. Most homes in Oma were old, and many seemed to be falling apart. In 2010, Oma was ranked the 1,426\textsuperscript{th} wealthiest town out of 1,764 towns surveyed in Japan (wealth rate was calculated by average income of residents).\footnote{大間町 日本地域番付 [Oma: Japan district rankings]. (2014). , 2014, from http://area-info.jpn.org/area024236.html} While being one of the most well publicized towns in Japan, Oma is also one of the poorest. This house looked like it was owned by one of the wealthiest people in the nation, its build clearly influenced by modern architecture, with a monochromatic color scheme and large black double doors out front. Later that day, I spoke to a local fisherman who told me that there are a select few tuna fishermen who are wildly successful, often times by having had their catch chosen for the \textit{hatsuseri} ritual in January— instantly becoming a millionaire. Even without having their fish chosen for \textit{hatsuseri}, an Oma Bluefin tuna fisherman may earn up to $700,000 annually.\footnote{Rigney, M. (Ed.). (2012). 2012. \textit{In Pursuit of Giants: One Man's Global Search for the Last of the Great Fish}. New York: Viking: 126.} However, most Oma fishermen are struggling because fish are not as abundant as they used to be. Industrial fishing has severely depleted stocks and small town fishing communities like Oma suffer from a decrease in catch rate.

An Oma fisherman once told me a fisher who can catch anything, ranging from squid, seaweed, abalone, and mackerel (depending on the season) is a “true fisherman.” This man implied that those who only fish for Bluefin tuna and make
a large profit are not a “true fisherman.” There is a clear divide even within this small fishing community between those who work year round and fish for anything they can get, and the select few that make hundreds of thousands by successfully targeting Bluefin.

This divide is an accurate representation of the conflicting narratives regarding the fishing community of the town. Oma is a contradiction in itself: it is the symbol of high-end Japanese cuisine, overconsumption, and the multimillion-dollar fishing industry in the media, while in reality it struggles just like any other small fishing community suffering from depleted stocks. In this chapter, I will use Oma as a case study to explore how the public perception of fisheries in Japan (controlled by the media) and the reality of the matter are disjunct. Oma’s struggles mirror the rest of Japan regarding overfishing: a select few make millions and the media indulges in their success, while the rest silently suffer from the looming threat of a collapsing fishery.

**The Oma Brand**

Oma not only refers to a town in Japan but a globally esteemed brand that assures a stamp of approval to the high-quality tuna that are brought ashore in Oma. The Oma Bluefin are the Louis Vuitton of tuna—it is not just the quality of the fish, but the name itself that holds value. Oma fishermen only fish in the Tsugaru Straight, a channel between Honshu (the mainland) and Hokkaido (the northern island). Even if fishermen use the same fishing methods and fish from the same stock, they are sold for significantly lower prices if they are not brought ashore in Oma. This is because Oma has been successful in branding its fish under the name of the town. Any fish that is sold through the Oma Fisherman’s
Cooperative are registered under the trademark of the town and sold for much higher prices than any other Bluefin tuna in the Japanese market. The Oma brand is recognized outside of Japan as well: in March of 2009, a sushi chef from Hong Kong paid approximately $50,000 to buy only half of a 280-pound Oma Bluefin.\footnote{Fackler, M. (2009). \textit{Tuna town in Japan Sees Falloff of Its Fish}, 2013, from \url{http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/20/world/asia/20tuna.html?pagewanted=all}} The success of the Oma brand is not simply due to the quality of the fish, but to the way in which it has been marketed. Japanese media outlets and the Oma Tourism Association has established Oma Bluefin as the best-quality tuna in the world by presenting the fish as high-end cuisine and placing great emphasis on Oma’s traditional fishing practices in its marketing campaign.

A handful of Oma fishermen practice the traditional Japanese method of single-line fishing, known as \textit{ipponzuri} (一本釣り). \textit{Ipponzuri} is the antithesis to modern industrial fishing that includes large ships with hundreds of crewmembers scooping up thousands of tons of fish per excursion with nets or baited hooks. \textit{Ipponzuri}, by contrast, is conducted in two-person open boats with only handheld rods and live bait.\footnote{Fackler, \textit{Tuna Town in Japan Sees Falloff.}} The town is fiercely proud of both its fresh tuna and its traditional fishing methods because it truly tests the skill and strength of the fishermen. Some say the battle with a Bluefin can take up to twelve hours.\footnote{Fackler, \textit{Tuna Town in Japan Sees Falloff.}} An Oma fisher once told me that the fishermen of his village are the best in the world, especially those who practice \textit{ipponzuri}. \textit{Ipponzuri} fishermen are the smartest fishermen: they know how to trick the almighty Bluefin tuna—this is what is key.
Japanese television programs and the Oma Tourism Association had great interest in the dramatic and honorable one-on-one battle stories between the fisherman and the Bluefin, using this “man versus the sea” narrative to their advantage in their nation-wide marketing campaign. Scholars argue that the underlying force behind the popularity of Bluefin tuna is the fighting spirit of the fish and the fisherman. Some tuna literally fight to their deaths, tugging on the line until all energy is lost and their bodies begin to fail. Bluefin tuna serve as a symbol of Japanese national identity and cuisine, and are referred to as the “samurai fish.”

It is important to note that because ipponzuri fishing significantly decreases chances of catching tuna in comparison to any other method, only a handful of the most skilled Oma fishermen practice this method. The more common fishing method is haenawa fishing, another Japanese traditional method that uses a line of multiple baited hooks attached to buoys. Even though many Oma Bluefin are caught using this method, the marketing campaign neglects this less romantic and marketable fishing method.

The Oma Tourism Association clearly place emphasis on ipponzuri by glorifying the masculine fishermen and their struggles to catch tuna. The Oma brand uses a gendered marketing technique, not only selling high-quality Bluefin, but the blood, sweat, and tears of the fisherman that struggle to catch them. This emphasis on masculinity is apparent in almost every product sold by the tourism

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47 Bestor, How Sushi Went Global, 54.
association, from key chains and T-shirts to “tuna cream puffs.” The packaging of these products are painted with images of masculine men holding a rod and reel, tanned from the sun, veins popping out of their heads and arms while tugging on one of the most powerful creatures of the ocean.

In a male-dominated society that places great emphasis on tradition, it is no coincidence that masculinity plays a significant role in the marketing of a fish that serves as the cultural symbol of Japan. To this day, female members of the Imperial house are prohibited to accede to the throne and can only retain their Imperial status if they marry male Imperials. In marketing a fishing method that represents Japanese tradition, the portrayal of masculinity plays a crucial role, as Japanese tradition, rooted in Shintoism and the Imperial system, glorifies the patriarch.

Emphasis on Oma’s archetypal fishermen is most prominent in portrayals of these characters in popular media, which has instilled this image within the public and further perpetuated the glorification of masculinity, and therefore of Bluefin tuna. Oma’s rise to fame was heavily dependent on a combination of documentary film series and weekly dramas depicting the lives of their fishermen, as well as a variety of comedic shows that send celebrity comedians to Oma and film them experience the hard lives of a fisher.

48 The Tuna Cream Puff is a new product that contains DHA powder made from tuna fat – a health product that lowers cholesterol levels. This odd combination of attempting to create a product that is both tasty and injected with allegedly healthy chemicals is a very authentically Japanese invention, in my opinion.
49 Jones, Colin P. A. “And then there was one?: Japan’s right royal crisis dwindling number of males could bring about constitutional quandary.” The Japan Times, 2012. Available from http://www.japantimes.co.jp/community/2012/01/17/issues/and-then-there-was-one-japans-right-royal-crisis/#.UzyK761dX0k.
One of the most popular programs in Japan is Sekai no Hatemade Itte Q! (世界の果てまでイッテ Q!), a weekly travel/comedy show where they send celebrity comedians to numerous places around the world for a comedic but meaningful once-in-a-lifetime experience. Since its debut in 2007, this program has been consistently ranked as one of the highest-rated television shows in Japan. Its highest rating (percentage of viewers) is a whopping 22.6% in 2010—to put this number in perspective, the highest rating in Japan for the 2014 Sochi Olympics was during the opening ceremony, at 13.9%. In 2012, this program aired a special on Oma. They sent two comedians to the town in pursuit of catching a Bluefin tuna over 100 kilograms. The segment begins with the comedians standing by the main tourist attraction of the town: a stone statue, with a life-sized Bluefin tuna on one side and the masculine fists of a fisherman on the other: a clear representation of the “Oma brand,” marketing not only the quality of its fish but the masculinity of the archetypal fisherman (see illustration).

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50 [View ratings data](http://www.videor.co.jp/data/ratedata/program/oly_win/2014_sochi1.htm).
“Oma, the Town of Bluefin Tuna *Ipponzuri* Fishing”

The comedians went on the boat of the Kikuchi family, a fishing team including a father and son. This episode featured sequences of the father and son teaching the comedians a very specific method of throwing the bait in the ocean to increase catch rate. When a Bluefin finally hits the line, the comedian is not strong enough to pull the fish closer. The fishers quickly take over, and as the fish emerges out of the water, the footage switches to slow motion. A two-meter fish is pulled up onto the boat, and the comedian screams, “It’s a monster!” The media narrative of glorifying the fishermen is most apparent when the comedian recalls the battle with the fish. He claims that when he was tugging on the line it felt like
his fingers were going to be severed. The comedian claims he cannot comprehend how the fishermen are strong enough to pull the fish closer to the boat. He says in astonishment, “They are superhuman. They must be superhuman.”

Glorifying the archetypal fisherman is not only accomplished by placing emphasis on their strength, but on their skill and discipline. An annual documentary film series made by TV Asahi Corporation, one of Japan’s leading television networks, stresses this very aspect. This series is called The Men that Rely on Tuna (マグロに賭けた男たち); it follows a select few Bluefin tuna fishermen in Oma and tells the dramatic stories of their lives, facing economic hardships and risking their lives out in the ocean. This program won an ATP Award (similar to the Primetime Emmys in the US) for best documentary film series in 2005. The Men that Rely on Tuna airs during the New Year celebration, the season when television ratings are at its peak throughout the year. Its record view rating is 17.1% in 2006.

This wildly popular television program celebrates the lives of the fishers, dramatizing their high-risk lifestyles as an honorable, traditional, and masculine Japanese profession. The episode that won an award in 2005 follows the story of two fishers, a tag team of a man and his wife, the only female Bluefin tuna fisher

52 There is no direct translation for the word kakeru (賭ける) which I translated as “rely” in the title. Kakeru can also be translated as “depend on” or “bank on,” and it is often used when describing gambling when one puts their money on the line for a risky game. In this case, kakeru is used both for the meaning of the fishermen putting their lives on the line, as well as having an economic factor that plays into the underlying meaning of this title.
54 Takagi, The Men That Rely On Tuna.
55 Video research ltd.
in Japan. She is referred to as the brains of the team: she can effectively read the sonar and accurately advise her husband to throw in the bait at the perfect moment. Her husband is the muscle of their team, playing the role of the patriarchal fisherman.

The second the tuna eats the bait, dramatic music ensues. The man moves quickly and quietly, sweat dripping down his face as he tugs on the line. This season they are unable to catch a Bluefin over 100 kilograms, but they are still known as one of the most successful fishers in Oma. After their catch, the man explains that they must completely wash away the blood of the tuna from their boat. “Tuna are smart,” he says, explaining that they can smell the blood of their own kind and will not eat the bait from their boat without a perfect wash. The episode includes numerous pieces of information like this, highlighting the abundance of knowledge and expertise necessary to be a fisherman.\textsuperscript{56} The subtitle of the episode reads “A life-or-death fight with a violent ocean! Husband and wife: master Bluefin tuna fishers.” This series continually refers to the fishers as \textit{meijin (名人)}, or master, perpetuating the narrative that glorifies the specialized skill of fishermen.\textsuperscript{57}

The episode also includes a segment where they interview a sushi chef who owns a restaurant in Ginza, a neighborhood in Tokyo famous for its high-end cuisine. The sushi chef explains that he only serves Oma Bluefin because “a sushi restaurant can have the greatest fish, but if their tuna is not good, nobody will

\textsuperscript{56} Takagi, \textit{The Men That Rely on Tuna}.
\textsuperscript{57} Takagi, \textit{The Men That Rely on Tuna}. 
come.”  

This segment clearly plays into the public perception of Oma Bluefin being the best-quality tuna in the world.

**A Struggling Town: Sustainability and Economic Survival**

Oma is a community that has stood out for publicly advocating for stronger restrictions on industrial fishing practices in Japan. This is because Oma’s identity as a fishing community that practices traditional methods is not only about the pride and honor of the fishermen, but about the sustainability of the method. *Ipponzuri* and *haenawa* fishing allows fishermen to only catch large, adult fish, leaving younger tuna in the ocean to maintain a viable fish stock.  

Furthermore, Western environmental media outlets seem to praise Oma not just as the “Town of Tuna,” but a town of sustainable fishing. Published articles on Oma explain that the fishermen have a respect for their catch, humanely killing them and putting great care in dressing the Bluefin. This respect and emphasis on sustainability is a crucial element of the traditional fishing method.

In addition, Oma’s stance on greater regulation of catches stems from having been economically hit hard by depleting fish stocks caused by overfishing. The Okoppe Fishermen’s Cooperative, a smaller organization in competition to the Oma Fishermen’s Cooperative, has suffered greatly from decreasing catch rate. Many fishermen in the town claim that the organization will definitely go bankrupt in the coming years. Ten to twenty years ago in Oma each boat could routinely catch three or four tuna a day during the season. Today, thirty to forty

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58 Takagi, *The Men That Rely on Tuna.*  
59 Fackler, *Tuna Town in Japan Sees Falloff.*  
boats of Oma fishermen would be lucky to collectively catch six tuna per day. The fishermen claim that all the fish are being taken by industrial fishing fleets using trawlers or purse seine fishing methods. Today, catching a large Bluefin tuna is a celebratory occasion. It happens rarely, and because catch rate is decreasing, large tuna can be sold for much higher prices. Fishermen of Oma say catching a large Bluefin is like winning the lottery.

Hirofumi Hamabata, president of the Oma Fishermen’s Coop, has repeatedly gone on record speaking out against industrial fishing. In an interview with the New York Times in 2009, Hamabata claimed that he was “furious at Tokyo’s bureaucrats for failing to protect our tuna…they don’t lift a finger against the industrial fishing that just sweeps the ocean clean.” Such strong sentiments are rare in a reserved and conservative country like Japan. Hamabata also specifically advocates for an end to large-scale net fishing in the seas east of Oma to prevent the fishing of juveniles. Hamabata claims that technological advancement has made industrial fishing simply too efficient, and it is necessary to go back to traditional fishing methods that only allow fishermen to catch adult fish.

Another staff member of the Oma Fishermen’s Coop told me that all of Oma feels that fish stocks are depleting. Purse seining and trawling in the oceans south of Japan have decreased the number of fish migrating northwards toward

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62 Fackler, *Tuna Town in Japan Sees Falloff*.
63 Fackler, *Tuna Town in Japan Sees Falloff*.
Oma, making it increasingly difficult for less efficient traditional methods such as *ipponzuri* to catch fish. “Everybody hates overfishing here,” he says.

Oma struggles economically because successors of the local fishing industry are decreasing as well. Over a period of twenty years, Oma fishermen have decreased from 900 to 700, a distressing decrease for a 6,000-person town. An Oma fishermen told me that he believes only about one third of the children of fishermen follow in their father’s footsteps. The man told me there have been several accidents in the past two years that have been discouraging young men to become fishers. The most recent one occurred this past winter, when a father and his son, both fishermen, crossed the Tsugaru Strait to buy bait at Hakodate, a city on the Southern coast of Hokkaido. On their way back, the son fell into the freezing water, and his father did not notice over the noises of the strong wind and loud engine. By the time his father realized what had happened, it was too late, and they never found the son’s body. Accidents like this have discouraged many to continue the legacy of becoming an Oma fisherman. With fishermen’s cooperatives becoming bankrupt, fish becoming increasingly difficult to catch, and the job being dangerous, Oma residents are increasingly becoming discouraged to follow in their ancestors’ footsteps. The fisherman told me, “It is a dying craft.”

**Oma: Conflicting Narratives**

Oma is known as the glorious symbol of Japanese culture and cuisine—however, from my experiences there, I have seen that while its residents and fishermen have great pride in their Bluefin tuna, they are also a town that
struggles within a technologically advanced nation that is depleting fish stocks and therefore phasing out less-efficient traditional fishing methods.

Even within Oma, there seems to be a lack of consensus regarding depleted fish stocks. One fisherman told me that there are not actually less fish in the ocean. He claims that Bluefin tuna are simply changing migration routes due to global warming. Rising water temperatures have allegedly changed the migration routes of mackerel, and therefore their predator, Bluefin tuna, do not come through the Tsugaru Strait as much either. On the other hand, staff members of the Oma Fishermen’s Cooperative and the Oma town office told me it is definitely overfishing. Although there is little scientific proof of the theory regarding migration routes and global warming, the fact is that there is confusion regarding decreasing catch rate even within the “Town of Tuna.” If people who work in the industry cannot come to consensus, what does this say about the rest of the nation?
CHAPTER 2
MEDIA MANIPULATION AND SKEWED PUBLIC PERCEPTION

“Show us your Japanese pride!” The narrator says excitedly, a vocal tone and intonation commonly used during international sports events. A segment on a primetime television program on major network TV Asahi, called “Japan VS America: Sushi Chef Pride Match,” televised a reality show competition between a Japanese and an American sushi chef. In this segment, the two chefs create three dishes that are judged by five American food critics. The chef who gets the most votes wins the competition. There is no tangible prize for the winner, only the title of being the more superior sushi chef: is it going to be traditional sushi, or the fake, inauthentic American version? Beyond the glorification of fishing practices discussed in the previous chapter, there is an even more apparent celebration of the superiority of Japanese cuisine in popular media.

Meanwhile, in 2007, a one-hour documentary special aired on NHK (a network similar to BBC) that criticized Japanese industrial fishing practices of mackerel. The day before the airdate, the JFA called in the director of the special into their office, questioning him on the content of the documentary. If they had used any data that was not publicly available, the JFA had the authority to prevent the special from airing; a common justification used by the JFA to eliminate negative press. The JFA’s manipulative methods used to censor the media has proven to be successful, as most programs and published articles regarding fisheries in Japan are positive press.
In combination with the celebration of Japanese cuisine in popular media, the public has a skewed perception of fisheries management in Japan, and remains predominantly oblivious to overfishing in their own country. I have experienced Japanese citizens’ lack of awareness in environmental issues first-hand. Growing up in Japan and living there for eighteen years, I have found that most have never heard of Japan being predominantly blamed for the severe depletion of tuna stocks. Most have a positive image engrained in them of Japan being the ‘leading fishing nation.’ A friend also once told me she thought that Japan had stopped whaling more than ten years ago. How can the citizens of a nation that is painted as the poster child for unsustainable fishing policies and unethical whaling practices be so oblivious to what is going on around them?

In this chapter, I will uncover how the Japanese media has set forth a false representation of fisheries issues in Japan. This is a result of two factors: (1) the JFA and powerful fisheries corporations utilizing their politics and economic authority to make data inaccessible and preventing the publication of negative press, and (2) the media perpetuating the celebration of Japanese cuisine, especially regarding Bluefin tuna and sushi, claiming cultural superiority in the world. The JFA set forth media censorship, and media outlets have continued to perpetuate false representations of Japanese fisheries management.

**UNDER THE GUISE OF DEMOCRACY: INACCESSIBLE DATA AND THE JFA**

“We (the citizens of Japan) had no way of being informed about the current state of Japan’s fisheries in the first place,” Katsukawa Toshio of Mie University states, “outsiders (of the industry) cannot access information, and
insiders are prevented from making public remarks due to political pressures.”

Katsukawa relates the form of media censorship utilized by the JFA as similar to the censorship used during WWII, when the Japanese public was unaware that the country was losing the war—only the military’s successes were highlighted, and failures omitted. The Japanese media has painted only a positive image of the policies set out by the JFA by excluding their failures and placing great emphasis on celebrating successful fishing policies and glorifying fish consumption. The outright celebration of fishing and fish consumption has masked the apparent problems that surround it.

The media has a monopoly over the representation of fishing due to the invisibility of fishing practices out at sea. It is rare for any citizen to witness industrial fishing practices. This makes information on overfishing inherently difficult to uncover, and therefore it is inherently easy for associated businesses and government bodies to restrict information. This is not something that is special to Japan—most images that we have of fishing engrained in our minds are constructed by the information presented by the media.

The JFA strictly limits this information through *kisha clubs* (記者クラブ), or “journalist clubs.” *Kisha clubs* are unique to Japan’s media distribution system and journalism network—these are associations owned by certain organizations and government bodies (like the JFA) that operate as a platform to communicate with mainstream media. Journalists and media outlets that are

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granted a member of these *kisha clubs* have access to certain sets of information before their competitors, and in many cases are exclusively provided with information. Although the *kisha club* system exists to allegedly uphold the ethics and high standards of reliable journalism, both domestic and international journalists have frequently criticized this system as a form of censorship. This is because the system allows organizations to restrict information from certain media outlets and only provide them to the journalists that will highlight their successes. When there is a news story, the organization or government body will hold a press conference that is only accessible to those that were granted admission to their *kisha club*. Because *kisha clubs* are privately owned associations (even if they are run by government-associated bodies), they are mostly built by interpersonal relationships. If a media outlet publishes a story that is unfavorable for a certain organization, they have the power to push them out of their *kisha club* and restrict information from them in the future; in other words, the system prevents journalists from publishing critical articles. Therefore, it is no surprise that the media outlets and journalists in the *kisha club* of the Japan Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (of which the JFA is a part) never paint the JFA in a negative light.

Not only does the JFA make data inaccessible to the public by providing information only to favorable media outlets, but they also silence scholars and scientists. Data on catch rate collected by the Japan Fisheries cooperative (JF; 漁

\[\text{67 Takada, Masayuki. 2004. “なぜ記者クラブ問題なのか問われているのは「制度」ではなく、記者個人や幹部の「姿勢の問題」 [Why *kisha clubs* are a problem: Not a problem of institution, but journalists' and executives' attitude].} \text{アジア記者クラブ [Asia Press Club]: 8.}\]
業協同組合) are managed by the JFA, and the data that is published is highly limited. JFA data open to the public is only the number of fish caught per species.\textsuperscript{68} This does not specify the percentage of parental mass, which is one of the most important factors in modeling sustainable fisheries. In other words, it is impossible for scholars and scientists to gauge the sustainability of Japanese fishing practices with publicly available information.\textsuperscript{69}

In order to acquire parental mass data, one must apply to obtain the information as a researcher and clarify what the data is going to be used for to the JFA. Scholars have claimed that some researchers are denied permission to access parental mass data if their research proposals are critical of JFA policies. Furthermore, if one is granted access but then publishes a critical paper using the data, the JFA will file a claim against the researcher for making “improper remarks” and they are often banned from accessing JFA data in the future. This can significantly impact the future research of a scholar or scientist, and therefore many are unable to actively criticize fishing policies in their publications.\textsuperscript{70}

In this way, Japanese government bodies have implemented systems that heavily restrict the freedom of media outlets and scholars. This has prevented Japan from implementing successful fishery regimes that nations such as New Zealand and Norway have put into effect twenty years ago. With few people having access to information and therefore no platform or a strong foundation of knowledge for citizens to criticize the fishing institution, change in Japan cannot

\textsuperscript{69} Katsukawa, \textit{The Fishing Industry}, 170.
\textsuperscript{70} Katsukawa, \textit{The Fishing Industry}, 170.
occur. The JFA will continue to exhibit authoritarian power under the guise of a democratic nation.

**Deflecting Blame**

The reality is that fishing is a declining industry in Japan. Catch rate is decreasing and therefore fewer people are pursuing careers as a fisher. This has been continually covered in newspapers, magazines, and on television, especially in the context of Bluefin tuna. Although scholars claim that the main cause of this is depleting stocks, the media focuses their attention on a buzzword that has been continually mentioned for over forty years: *sakana banare* (魚離れ) or ‘fish separation.’

Growing up in Japan, this is a term I have continually seen in the media, even before my interest in overfishing. This term refers to the concept of the Japanese public becoming culturally separated from fish in a modern Westernized world, increasing their consumption of beef, chicken, and pork, and decreasing their consumption of fish. This term is used with a sense of urgency in the Japanese media to this day, as ‘fish separation’ is a representation of the death of traditional Japanese culture. This term is problematic as it deflects blame from overfishing being the cause of the declining industry. In turn, it places fault on the consumers who are apparently not eating enough fish and causing the decline of one of the nation’s most honorable assets. The term is used to draw in guilt from the consumers.

The term *sakana banare* was first published in a newspaper article in 1976 on research conducted by the Fish Popularization Association (FPA; おさかな普

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及協会). Most Japanese people do not know that the FPA was created by fifty-nine fishing or fish product processing companies. The term *sakana banare* was created by the fishing industry in an attempt to promote its own products and deflect blame for a falling industry. Two years later, the JFA published a federal document on *sakana banare*, emphasizing that younger generations are increasingly eating more chicken, beef, and pork, and buying less fish products. However, fish consumption rate was actually increasing in Japan until 2001. This campaign neglected to mention this fact, and blamed the consumers for the declining industry.

The government document on *sakana banare* published by the JFA mentioned several reasons for Japanese citizens becoming culturally separated from fish, including fish being difficult to prepare in comparison to other meats, and rising prices. The JFA stated that the reason for fish becoming more expensive in supermarkets is the unwillingness of citizens to buy a whole fish (as it is difficult to prepare), and therefore more fish products are sold as fillets. This article claims that the reason for rising costs of fish is the increase in processing fees.

**CULTURAL SUPERIORITY AND CULINARY NATIONALISM**

The Japanese media has strongly advertised the superiority of the Japanese fisheries regime, fish market, and cuisine. In tandem with the omission of JFA

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75 *Chapter 2 The Development of “Fish Separation.”*
failures, this glorification plays into the false image of Japan’s fisheries management as honorable with little economic and environmental troubles. In this section I will discuss the different narratives used by media outlets that perpetuate the celebration of fish consumption and cuisine in Japan.

The first narrative in the media is the emphasis on successful Japanese fishing regimes. The media often mentions three examples in context of praising Japan’s sustainable fisheries: sakura shrimp from Suruga Bay, snow crab from Kyoto, and sailfin sandfish from Akita. Major newspapers and television networks have advertised the strict fishing seasons in Suruga Bay and Akita, as well as publicizing Kyoto’s snow crab industry as the first fishery in Japan to be awarded an “ecolabel” by the Marine Stewardship Council. Although all of these are in fact sustainable fisheries, the media’s uneven press coverage on success has caused a skewed public perception.

The second narrative is the media condemning the appropriation of Japanese cuisine (particularly sushi and Bluefin tuna) by Western nations and in turn glorifying the authenticity and superiority of cuisine in Japan. This is the result of the global sushi boom, beginning in the United States in the early 1970s, causing a chain reaction of sushi restaurants to open in Europe, Asia, Russia, India, and to Latin America. The globalization of sushi occurred because of a new emphasis on a healthy diet based on vegetables and fish in Western nations

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76 Katsukawa, *The Fishing Industry*, 166.
that erupted in association with ecology movements, as well as increasing cultural correspondence between the US and Japan.⁸⁰

The Japanese government and media have repeatedly painted the global sushi boom as “Japanese sushi conquering the world,” and pointing out the appropriation of sushi culture as inauthentic and incorrect. Scholars Rumi Sakamoto and Matthew Allen from New Zealand and Australia respectively, have claimed that such narratives suggest an existence of “culinary nationalism”—Japan has claimed the ownership and superiority of Japanese cuisine in the world.⁸¹

This is apparent in many forms of media, including the “Japan VS America: Sushi Chef Pride Match” segment mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. The unrestrained enthusiasm of the studio audience towards the Japanese chef’s Bluefin tuna dish, and the contrasting disgust towards the dishes made by the American chef represents a common theme told by Japanese media. From the beginning, the narration makes clear that the viewers are meant to root for the Japanese sushi chef. “He brings out the delicate flavors of the fish,” he says, a common saying used in comparison to American foods, which are, from a Japanese perspective, all over salted, deep fried, and over sauced. This makes apparent the sense of superiority towards Japanese cuisine, which places emphasis on delicate, subtle tastes.⁸²

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⁸⁰ Sakamoto and Allen, There’s Something Fishy, 101.
⁸¹ Sakamoto and Allen, There’s Something Fishy, 101.
As the clip shows images of the American sushi chef preparing his meal using unorthodox ingredients, the audience reacts in shock, angrily yelling, “Worcestershire sauce!?” or “Of course, cilantro!” Towards the end of the American chef’s segment, he deep fries two of his dishes, something that is often times referred to as jado (邪道), or wicked. The audience reacts in disgust, and the narrator mockingly says, “this is the American style.” The studio audience is especially disgusted when the American chef creates a dish where he combines Bluefin tuna, mango, and chili sauce. The emphasis on Bluefin tuna being the most important aspect of sushi is unmistakable, and therefore the audience is unforgiving of the American chef that is tainting the symbol of Japanese cuisine.

To no surprise, when the Japanese sushi chef prepares his dishes, there is nothing but support from the studio audience. The judges taste dishes made by both chefs, and all five votes go to the Japanese sushi chef. The studio audience erupts into applause and cheers. One of the judges states, “Jerry (the American chef) was amazing: his ideas, technique, and passion. I am proud that he is an American chef. However, his opponent was far too superior. I was touched by every dish he made.”

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83 ‘Wicked’ is an oversimplified translation of jado. Although this term is now often used in a joking context, it has great cultural meaning. Ja (邪) is a character that means evil, or used to describe bad spirits. Do (道) means path, or ‘the way,’ insinuating a certain standard or tradition. The two characters combined creates a meaning that does not simply mean ‘wicked,’ but a deviance from what is traditional and right, to something that is evil.

84 Go! Japanese Pride 2.

85 I translated the last sentence as “I was touched by every dish he made,” however this is not a direct translation. In this clip, the American food critic is dubbed over in Japanese. In Japanese, they use the term “感動を覚えた” which is a term specific to Japanese and has no direct translation. It means “I learned how to become inspired/touched/impressed,” meaning the dish was so amazing that he learned what it truly meant to be inspired/touched/impressed. Seeing as this
Television programming like this that place emphasis on Japanese sushi as the best and most authentic is a clear celebration of global Japanese victory and instilling a strong sense of pride within the Japanese public. This is exactly the narrative that is deflecting public attention from the JFA’s lack of fisheries policies. The media continues to glorify Japanese cuisine, especially in regards to Bluefin tuna, meanwhile the segment offers no explanation as to why the fish is so expensive and how several Bluefin species have been granted endangered status. The Japanese media continues to glorify the consumption of a species that environmentalists claim are severely depleted.

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term has no direct translation in English, I assume that the Japanese translation is an inflated version of what the American food critic actually said.
CHAPTER 3

ACADEMIC DISCOURSE: CHALLENGING SCIENCE

In Japan, there is a lack of consensus regarding overfishing. Publications by scholars and journalists are constantly clashing about whether the data is correct, if Western environmental organizations are unfairly targeting Japan, and to what extent the nation is responsible for depleted stocks. The discussion seems to be similar to the global warming debate in the United States: while there is overwhelming scientific consensus within the international community, domestic academics and politicians continue to fight over the facts. Ironically, there is very little discourse in Japan about global warming—only unreasonable Americans would reject climate science. Because fishing is complexly linked to the culture and economy of Japan, defaming fishing and fish consumption is a direct threat to the assets of the nation that people find more important than oceanic ecosystems.

In a defensive reaction to Western environmentalists severely criticizing Japan, scholars, writers, and politicians have rejected responsibility for the declining Bluefin population.

In this chapter, I will examine academic publications that have deflected blame from Japan by undermining the scientific credibility of Bluefin tuna stock projections. The most notable arguments by Japanese scholars and journalists include the critique of Bluefin tuna’s categorization as *endangered*, and challenging scientific data collection processes. A lack of consensus amongst scholars and journalists has played a significant role in the formation of Japanese public perception towards overfishing. In tandem with media manipulation and censorship, the public remains unaware, and those who seek to find information in
Japanese publications are left with a collection of conflicting sources and an aggressive and often scientifically incorrect discourse between academics.

**IUCN Red List for Threatened Species**

Atlantic Bluefin tuna have been designated *Endangered (EN)* status, and Southern Bluefin *Critically Endangered (CR)* by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Many Japanese scholars, scientists, and politicians spoke out against this categorization, including scholar Yuji Uozumi, who condemns the IUCN classification system in his book, *Are Tuna Endangered? (マグロは絶滅危惧種か)*. In his writing, Uozumi challenges the categorization criteria used by the IUCN. He justifies the overfishing of Bluefin tuna by claiming that while stocks are severely depleted, the species is *not* endangered. Uozumi’s claims are especially jarring as he is a well respected scholar: he is a professor at the prestigious Kyoto University’s School of Agriculture and head researcher at the National Research Institute of Far Seas Fisheries.

Uozumi makes two sweeping assumptions in his book that I want to highlight. The first is an argument that is commonly used in the whaling debate: Western animal rights and wildlife protection organizations are approaching the issue from an irrational and emotional perspective. They paint the Japanese fishing industry as the enemy and attempt to crush the industry by disregarding scientific data and overemphasizing the severity of depleted fish stocks. Uozumi, amongst others, claims this is a result of Western ethnocentrism, where the West

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pushes their beliefs onto the Japanese public and deems their cultural perspective and practice as unethical.\footnote{Uozumi, \textit{Are Tuna Endangered}? 12.}

The heart of the debate between scholars like Uozumi and international environmentalists lies within clashing perspectives of what is valuable. This is a question not only of cost/benefit analysis but also of ethics. From an environmental perspective, Bluefin tuna holds intrinsic ecological value; this is, that Bluefin tuna is inherently valuable in its existence and the role it plays in oceanic ecosystems, apart from any economic or instrumental benefit to humans. In other words, nature is inherently valuable. Uozomi, in contrast, focuses only on the economic value of Bluefin. He claims that the placement of Bluefin species on the red list was immoral because it threatens to wipe out fishing industries.\footnote{Uozumi, \textit{Are Tuna Endangered}? 16.} Uozumi’s argument invokes a logical fallacy: the false dichotomy in which fishermen’s livelihoods are opposed to environmental regulation. Many environmental organizations do seem to condemn all forms of Bluefin fishing as unethical, and this perspective is problematic as it rejects all cultural and economic factors that are closely connected to the Japanese fishing industry. However, Uozumi’s claims are even more problematic by forcefully claiming environmentalism as anti-Japanese and anti-fishing. Sustainability, which many environmentalists and fishers fight for, is a term that should include economic and cultural stability as well. Environmental, cultural, and economic sustainability can coexist.
Uozumi claims that the irrational and emotional environmental perspective was the driving force in classifying Bluefin species as *endangered*—stating it is clear that they are not endangered because the IUCN classification system is flawed. This is the second point I wish to highlight. Uozumi argues for a redefinition of the term “endangered.” He agrees that the Bluefin populations have been overfished, but claims it is acceptable; the population is still viable, and therefore the species is not endangered.\(^9\)

In 1991, the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) reported that Atlantic Bluefin parental mass have plummeted to one tenth of its population since 1970. From this information, the IUCN claimed they were endangered under Criteria III of the Red List: if the population decreases more than 50% within two generations, then the species is endangered. Uozumi rejects Criteria III, claiming that it is an incorrect assumption and a poor definition for the term “endangered.” He argues that a sharp population decrease does *not* mean the species is in danger of extinction, as the population may still be plentiful enough for recovery. His complete rejection of the classification of Bluefin species as *endangered* fuels the unfounded belief that a 90% parental mass decline is somehow justifiable, and for a credible scholar to boldly state this further confuses the Japanese public.\(^9\)


\(^9\) It is important to note that many of Uozumi’s claims are valid, as there are many scholars (not just Japanese) that have criticized the IUCN classification system. Uozumi brings up an interesting point about how the Blue Whale, with only an estimated population of 5000 to 10,000, are classified as EN, while Southern Bluefin are ranked CR with a population of 780,000 (CR is *more* endangered than EN). Reproductive behavior governs the classification process as well, so it is not just about numbers, but it does seem incorrect that the Blue Whale is apparently “less” endangered than Southern Bluefin tuna (the Blue Whale’s gestation period is approximately one year,
DATA COLLECTION AND POPULATION ESTIMATES

Another notable and more jarring method used by Japanese scholars and journalists that reject overfishing is the blatant dismissal of scientific data. Celebrity journalist Gunji Sadanori published a book titled *Tuna War* (マグロ戦争) in 2007, with a shocking subtitle in bold, red letters: “It was all a big lie that Bluefin tuna were going to disappear! There are vast amounts of tuna waiting to be found in the seas of Japan and Taiwan!!” Gunji claims that the data collection methodology used to estimate Bluefin tuna populations is severely flawed, and therefore stock projections are incorrect.91

Current stock assessment is based on an analysis of the catch rate of fishing vessels. From this data, it is possible to project a population estimate in addition to the degree by which the stock is increasing or decreasing. Data is recorded by catch per unit effort (for example, number of fish caught per 1,000 hooks) and age composition of catch. This data is analyzed through a set of hypothetical models and published as stock projections by international research organizations.92 However, research and management of oceanic migratory species is inherently difficult: the ocean is vast and data analysis is complicated and subjective. This is because there are multiple models used to analyze this data that can remarkably change the final stock projections. The subjectivity of fish stock projection is a well-studied discipline, and many Western scholars have

repeatedly criticized Japan’s stock projections as being politically tainted and biased. Unsurprisingly, Japan criticizes Western NGOs and governments’ stock projections for being prejudiced as well.93

Gunji uses the possible flaws in the data collection method as a reason to reject the fact that Bluefin tuna populations have plummeted. He points out that even if many fish are present on the sonar, if fishing lines are incorrectly placed or drift in the wrong direction and the catch is zero, the population count is recorded as zero. He daringly states, “What the scientists are saying is not the truth.”94 Gunji is pointing at possible scientific error to discredit published data—however, his argument lacks an understanding of the scientific method. Scientific research always has room for error, and in the case of fish data collection, vast amounts of data are compiled and therefore room for error is decreased. Claiming that the potential faults of research make the data invalid is a rejection of the credibility of the scientific method and the global scientific community at large.

To support his claims, Gunji tells a story when Haneda Hiromu, a fisherman who helped Gunji in his research, “battled” with Australian scientists in 2000. Haneda brought these scientists onto his fishing boat in the Indian Ocean to prove to them that Southern Bluefin tuna were not critically endangered. He caught a vast amount of fish, and the Australian scientists “widened their eyes” in disbelief.95 He tells the story in a patronizing tone, mocking them, “under the banner of world-class international organizations, scientists at this level are

93 Sato, Fishy Business, 221.
94 Gunji, Tuna War, 40.
95 Gunji, Tuna War, 40.
conducting research." In an attempt to back his claims, Gunji displays a lack of understanding of ecological principles. If a species is endangered, it does not mean they are impossible to find. The author’s claim is similar to a climate change denier pointing to a record cold day to disprove global warming—Gunji seeks to raise any shred of doubt in his readers to gain support, without scientific evidence.

Gunji is one of the more high profile authors in comparison to other nonfiction writers and academics who conduct research on Bluefin tuna, as he has famously published twenty six non-fiction books, appeared on television several times as a “Bluefin tuna expert,” and his book is marketed as “praised by Minomonta,” a well-respected television host. While it would be incorrect to say that his ideas reflect that of the Japanese public, Gunji’s close connection to Japanese media outlets has made his extremist claims a part of the ongoing debate regarding depleted stocks.

**A MIXED MESSAGE**

Meanwhile, there are Japanese publications that strongly argue against journalists such as Gunji, openly criticizing Japan’s fisheries management regime. Scholar Katsukawa Toshio’s book for example, *The Fishing Industry: Japan’s Problem*, aims to debunk all prevailing theories, including global warming and illegal fishing vessels from China and Taiwan as reasons for depleted stocks. Katsukawa explains that the JFA continues its unsustainable fishing regime by making their scientific data and findings difficult to access (telling the story of his

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96 Gunji, *Tuna War*, 41.
own struggles in accessing JFA data as a scholar), as well as having cozy, personal ties with industrial fishing companies. Most importantly, Katsukawa places full responsibility on depleted fish stocks to Japanese overfishing; a stark contrast to the arguments presented by Uozumi and Gunji.

The array of popular academic books on overfishing both plays into Japanese public perception of overfishing, as well as representing the lack of consensus and certainty within the public. Along with the media manipulating and censoring information, the Japanese public is provided little guidance in seeking correct information. Citizens remain unaware and increasingly perplexed by the issue.
CONCLUSION

SUMMARY

Although Western governments and environmental organizations have painted Japan as a homogenous, irresponsible, and unethical fishing nation, investigating the domestic forces regarding overfishing has revealed that the circumstances are far more complicated than that. A domestic movement to prevent overfishing has not emerged due to the Japanese media glorifying tuna consumption and fishing, meanwhile silencing those that speak out against unsustainable harvesting. At the same time, those that seek further information are provided an array of conflicting data published by scholars and journalists. The Japanese public remains widely uneducated about one of the most detrimental fishing regimes in history that is being implemented by their own government—this is primarily due to the biased and skewed information presented by the Japanese media.

WHAT NOW? EMPOWERING NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS IN JAPAN

Western governments, media outlets, and environmental organizations have failed to present the economic, political, and cultural complexities that are closely tied to the Bluefin tuna industry. Because of this, Japan has been painted as a homogenous entity, and Western anti-fishing campaigns only use the tactic of foreign pressure—demonizing Japan as a nation and forcing the Japanese government to make decisions based on what will and will not cause international backlash. This has not proven to be effective.

What is most important is to educate the Japanese public and attempt to create an anti-overfishing movement within Japan. Such a movement should place
emphasis on a Japanese narrative, instead of a Western environmentalist narrative. The movement must celebrate Bluefin as a culturally symbolic fish, while simultaneously acknowledging the importance of sustainable fishing; in order to preserve the culture and the Japanese communities that are reliant on the industry, protecting the fish is of utmost importance.

Regarding the whaling debate, which has many similarities\(^{98}\) to Bluefin tuna controversies, I would argue that domestic action has been most effective and has garnered the most support in Japan. A city councilman of Taiji,\(^{99}\) Junichiro Yamashita, campaigned against whale meat in mandatory school lunches.\(^{100}\) He personally tested mercury levels of whale meat sold in local markets in a Japanese laboratory, and deemed them as “toxic waste.”\(^{101}\) His actions garnered public attention because, for the first time, a citizen of Taiji was publicly condemning whale meat consumption instead of a Western animal rights activist. Furthermore, the tests were conducted by Japanese scientists, and were therefore more trusted by the public than tests performed by Western NGOs with a specific agenda, as Japanese citizens often see those tests as biased. Yamashita’s campaign ultimately gained popular support and successfully banned whale meat

\(^{98}\) Their close ties to the fishing industry, censorship by the JFA, cultural narratives, economic incentives, and complacent government are overlapping themes between whaling and Bluefin tuna overfishing.

\(^{99}\) Taiji is a Japanese fishing town depicted by the Academy Award-winning documentary *The Cove*, which portrayed the annual slaughtering and consumption of dolphins. Since the release of the movie, the town has received international backlash from animal rights activists.


\(^{101}\) 和歌山・太地町住民に「水銀中毒なし」 194人調査 [Wakayama, taiji citizens have "no mercury poisoning" 194 tested]." 2012. *Asahi Newspaper*, May 31\(^{15}\), 2012.
in school lunches. He was successful because his campaign was not seen as anti-Japanese or ethnocentric: for the first time, Japanese people saw the problem as a public health issue and not an issue governed by foreign anti-Japanese rhetoric. The manner in which this occurred has proven that change within the country was successful through Japanese action.

Western organizations can still play a part by providing economic and political power to domestic NGOs and providing a forum in which Japanese citizens can access information and data sets. Furthermore, Western organizations and governments can collaborate with local Japanese fishing communities and cooperatives, such as the Oma Fishermen’s Cooperative. In order to spark a domestic anti-overfishing movement, it is necessary to provide a voice to those that are silenced in the Japanese media. Western organizations can help fishermen and affiliated workers directly affected by depleted stocks to spread their word: organizing public events where these fishermen can tell their stories, for example. A significant part of the problem is a lack of awareness in Japan—and the first step to take in order to solve that is to disperse unbiased information by empowering Japanese NGOs and activists.

**What Now? Reforming the Kisha Club System**

One of the most important steps to take is to reform Japan’s closed media system dominated by *kisha clubs*, which I mentioned in Chapter 2. Foreign media outlets continually criticize the *kisha club system* for being impossibly exclusive. Critics have claimed that it is common for the Japanese mass media to simply

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102 Psihoyos, *The Cove*. 
“regurgitate” announcements and releases provided to press clubs by the government.\textsuperscript{103}

Recently, there has been some domestic movement in abolishing \textit{kisha clubs}. In 2001, then Nagano prefectural governor Yasuo Tanaka put an end to two \textit{kisha clubs} that were associated with the prefectural government. Tanaka shut down the clubs and established a media center open to all journalists. Although this has yet to occur at a federal level, government officials and scholars have begun to speak out against this system.\textsuperscript{104} While empowering Japanese NGOs, it is also important for Western governments and environmental organizations to shed a light on this movement, bringing awareness to Japan and reforming the Japanese mass media.

\textbf{WHAT NOW? UNPACKING SCIENTIFIC UNCERTAINTY}

Most international conflicts regarding Bluefin are a result of scientific uncertainty of stock projections and recovery estimates. Therefore, in further studies, it is necessary to unpack what forces are causing the publication of conflicting science.

The infamous ‘Southern Bluefin Tuna conflicts’\textsuperscript{105} between Australia, New Zealand, and Japan may serve as an example of this. Japan repeatedly


\textsuperscript{105} Notable conflicts include the 2006 scandal with the AFMA I mentioned in the introduction, as well as a dispute in 1999. Japan aggressively continued to implement an experimental fishing program that required the harvesting of 2,000 extra tons of Southern Bluefin tuna outside of the agreed upon catch quota under the CCSBT. After strong opposition, Australia-New Zealand brought the case to the International Tribunal for the Law Of the Sea (ITLOS), asking for compulsory jurisdiction for Japan to include the catch of its experimental fishing program to be
publishes stock estimates higher than Australia and New Zealand, justifying its overfishing by claiming the JFA is not jeopardizing the fishery. The most jarring statistic comes from the conflicting 1998 estimates of stock recovery by 2020. While the Japanese stock recovery estimate was at 87%, Australia estimated the stock recovery at a devastating 9%. These two wildly divergent stock estimates provide insight into how a multitude of domestic forces within Australia, New Zealand and Japan have ‘tainted’ research methods to be politically biased.

With current technology, perfectly accurate methods to calculate Bluefin tuna populations do not exist. However, by analyzing the catch rate of fishing vessels, it is possible to project a population estimate in addition to the degree by which the stock is increasing or decreasing. Yet, there are indisputable flaws to this methodology, as catch rate data may not reflect the actual stock number, and there are multiple methods to analyze this data that can remarkably change the final stock projections. Because there are multiple ways to analyze the same data, nations can choose certain analytical methods over others that will provide stock projections and recovery estimates that align with their political and economic interests.

Few scholars have addressed the domestic forces that may be affecting scientific research processes regarding Bluefin tuna. Many Japanese scientists and

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107 Sato, Fishy Business, 224
government officials have doubted scientific reports published by environmental organizations and claim that the West is biased in its emotional attachment to animals. In response, Western scholars have suspected that Japan, in order to protect its valuable industry and cultural emblem, are institutionally underestimating the extent to which Bluefin tuna is being overfished. In order to have a more comprehensive understanding of the politics behind the Bluefin tuna industry, it is vital to investigate these domestic political motivations that are ‘tainting’ science. Could it really be just a coincidence that Japan, with the largest and most profitable Bluefin Tuna industry in the world, is consistently optimistic about stock recovery and demands for higher catch quotas?

RECENT NEWS: JUVENILE PACIFIC BLUEFIN TUNA CATCH DECREASE 2014

Although I have spent a significant part of this paper criticizing the Japanese government, there has been some positive press regarding the JFA lately. On March 10th 2014, the JFA announced a dramatic 50% cut in juvenile pacific Bluefin tuna catch compared to the average catch rate between 2002 and 2004. This will be effective starting in 2015. The JFA claimed that they are prioritizing stock protection over economic benefit. This was prompted due to Pacific Bluefin tuna parental mass being at a record low of 26,300 metric tons in 2012. Both Western and Japanese media outlets publicized this announcement in a positive light—and it is in fact a positive change, as most other nations have

only announced a catch rate decrease by 15 to 25%—but I would argue this is not as effective as it sounds.

Firstly, it is important to note that this is not a 50% cut in all Pacific Bluefin tuna catch. It is only a decrease in Bluefin that have not reached reproductive maturity, between the ages 0 and 3. These juveniles are referred to as yokowa or meji, and are sold for significantly lower prices: they are not the highly esteemed Bluefin tuna that are auctioned off for hundreds of thousands of dollars and served in high-end sushi restaurants. Although the overfishing of juveniles is much more destructive to oceanic ecosystems than overfishing those that have reached reproductive maturity, it would be naïve to assume that the JFA has fully reformed its fisheries management to a sustainable regime, as the government did not implement a decrease in overall catch.

Second, the JFA has not presented how they are going to implement these new restrictions. The JFA claims they are still in negotiation with fishermen regarding how they are going to enforce compliance. As Japan is infamous for breaching international agreements and overfishing for years without announcement, it is still uncertain as to how this will play out.

Most importantly, it is crucial to examine what the catch rate will actually become: after the 50% cut is implemented, Japanese fleets will be able to catch approximately 4,000 tons in the Western and Central Pacific, as well as the Sea of

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113 Sato, Fishy Business, 217.
Japan. However, Japanese fishing vessels were only able to catch 3,815 tons in 2012, despite a higher catch quota.\textsuperscript{115} Although a 50% cut is significant and an important step towards a sustainable fisheries regime, this cut may not affect Japan’s catch rate at all. This cut is a simple ploy to keep environmentalists and international organizations happy while maintaining Japan’s economic interests.

**Some Final Thoughts**

Criticism is not taken well in Japan due to Bluefin tuna’s cultural capital. Bluefin tuna serves as the glorified symbol of Japanese cuisine in both international and domestic landscapes. In the international realm, Japanese media outlets advertise Bluefin as a product that has conquered the world—the globalization of sushi culture has created a monstrous global demand for the tuna.\textsuperscript{116} On the other hand, in the domestic realm, Bluefin tuna is the most important aspect of sushi, a cuisine that represents the delicate flavors of Japanese food and the mastery of Japanese chefs. Bluefin tuna is one of the most significant national symbols of Japan; to question Bluefin fishing is to question Japanese culture.

In order to prevent the Japanese government from destroying its own national symbol, it is vital to acknowledge the complex cultural associations between Bluefin tuna consumption, fishing, media representation, political and economic motives, and the construction of Japanese national identity. The Japanese government is infamous for being complacent about environmental

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\textsuperscript{116} Bestor, *How Sushi Went Global*, 57.
issues; thus it will not be easy to make change. Further study and investigation of
the interrelated network of factors that contribute to the overfishing of Bluefin
tuna are of utmost importance. I hope this paper sheds light on an unstudied facet
of one of the most detrimental and far-reaching fishing industries in the world.
APPENDIX

Sample questions include for semi-structured interviews in Oma include:

(1) Oma Bluefin serves as a symbol of upscale Japanese cuisine. Do you feel pride towards the work that you do? Do you think all residents of the village feel this way?

(2) What is your understanding of the history of Bluefin tuna fishing in Oma?

(3) How do the residents of Oma celebrate Bluefin tuna? Do you feel that Oma’s identity as the “tuna village” is a result of a marketing tactic or does it have great historical roots?

(4) Are most residents of the village aware of depleted tuna stocks in the seas surrounding Japan?

(5) How do you feel about the federal government’s industrial fishing practices? Do you think they have affected the town in anyway (economic, cultural, etc.)?

(6) Do you feel that there is enough domestic media coverage regarding depleting tuna stocks in Japan and how fishing villages have been negatively affected by it?
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