



Japan and the Sea

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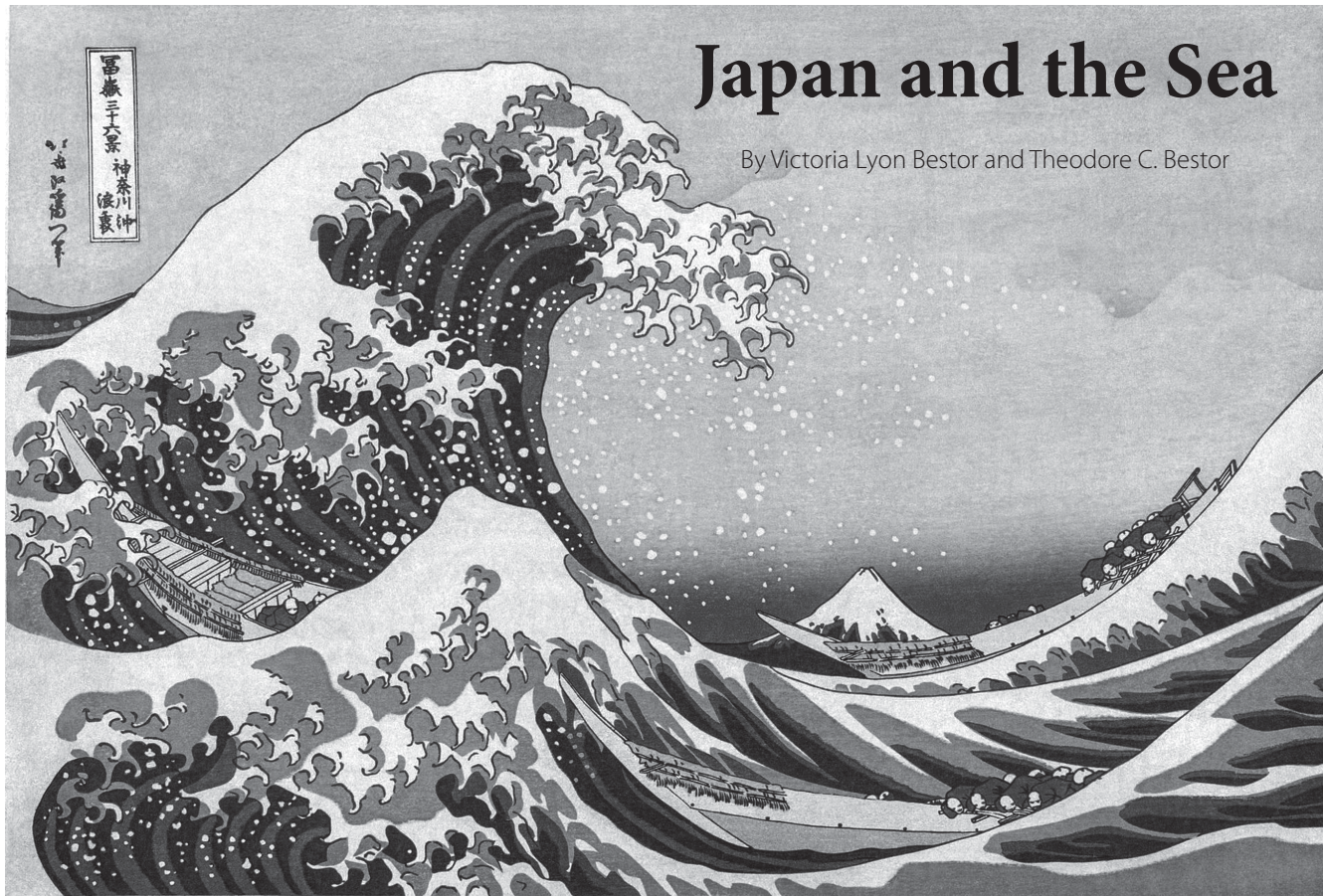
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Editor's Note: *The Routledge Handbook of Japanese Culture and Society* (Routledge, 2011) edited by Victoria Lyon Bestor, Theodore C. Bestor, and Akiko Yamagata is now available in paperback.



The Great Wave off Kanagawa, the iconic image of Japan and her relationship to the sea, by Katsushika Hokusai, ca. 1829–32. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <http://tinyurl.com/pe439ul>.

It is so often said that Japan is “a small island nation, poor in natural resources” one almost forgets the reality that Japan is an archipelago made up of thousands of islands. Japanese sometimes refer to their own national character as reflecting an “island nation mentality,” pointing toward the sense of being a self-contained society and culture isolated from others by the surrounding seas. Whether this is reflected in national character, it is certainly true that the sea plays an enormous role in Japanese culture, history, society, art, and identity.

Japan's Maritime Geography

The Pacific Ocean, the Sea of Okhotsk, the Sea of Japan, and the East China Sea surround Japan. Japan's coastlines stretch more than 18,480 miles, and no point anywhere in Japan is more than ninety-three miles from the sea, so maritime resources are accessible almost everywhere in Japan.

The Japanese archipelago extends roughly 1,860 miles from southernmost Okinawa to the northern tip of Hokkaidō, from approximately 26° to 46° north latitude: roughly the span of other major world fishing grounds in the Northern Hemisphere, such as those between the tip of Baja California and the mouth of the Columbia River, between Miami and Nova Scotia, and between the Canary Islands and Bordeaux.

The ocean currents that flow along Japan's coasts and the climatic diversity of these aquatic environments make these waters among the most productive and varied fishing regions in the world. The Pacific coast is swept by the warm northward-flowing Japan Current, also known as the *Kuroshio* (Black Current), which meets the cold, southward Okhotsk or *Oyashio* (Kurile Current) tile mixtures of warm and cold waters that produce great fishing grounds.

Japan and the Sea

By Victoria Lyon Bestor and Theodore C. Bestor

To the north are the subarctic waters of the North Pacific and the Sea of Okhotsk, much of which falls within Russia's 200-mile exclusive economic zone. To the west is the Sea of Japan, separating Japan and Korea (which demands that the body of water be known internationally as the East Sea). South and west of Kyūshū is the East China Sea, a shallow, treacherous, semitropical body of water.

The islands that make up Okinawa separate the Pacific from the East China Sea and extend southward from Kyūshū toward Taiwan (the farthest island of Yonaguni is only sixty-two miles from the Taiwan coast). And the Ogasawara Islands (also known as the Bonin Islands) are far out in the Pacific, roughly 620 miles south of Tokyo.

The Japanese archipelago is affected by the annual cycle of monsoons that are common to much of East, Southeast, and South Asia: a vast weather system that links the waters of the Western Pacific and the East China Sea to the land mass of the Asian continent. In the summer months, warm, moist air forms enormous storms—typhoons (literally “great winds”)—that go northwesterly, passing over Japan before striking the Asian mainland. In the winter months, cold, dry air sweeps southeasterly from Siberia, picking up moisture from the Sea of Japan and dumping heavy snow on the mountains of central Japan. Both phases of the monsoon cycle make possible the extensive irrigation of traditional Japanese rice agriculture (and in modern times create vast amounts of hydroelectric power).

The Sea and Early Japanese History

From the earliest ages, marine resources have been widely exploited in Japan. Its coastal waters are estimated to contain more than 2,000

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Map of Japan. Source: University of Texas, Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection at <http://tinyurl.com/mub475r>.



Hiroshige print of the islands of Matsushima in Mutsu Province. Source: Fuji Arts website at <http://tinyurl.com/n9w66ge>.

varieties of fish (approximately 10 percent of all known saltwater species), together with several hundred more species of shellfish, and almost all edible species have played some role in Japanese cuisine. Archaeological excavations of shell mounds reveal that during the Jōmon period (ca. 10,000–300 BCE) many varieties of fresh and saltwater fish and shellfish were the mainstay of the diet of the earliest human inhabitants of the Japanese islands; Jōmon people used quite sophisticated techniques for trapping large, open-ocean species, including dolphins and tuna.

Human habitation of Japan certainly occurred by sea routes. Although the origins of the first humans to live in the archipelago are uncertain, elements of pre- and early historical Japanese culture display connections to Southeast Asia, China, Korea, Siberia, and Polynesia in aspects of language, religion and cosmology, pottery, irrigated rice cultivation, and house styles.

The earliest historical accounts of Japan appear in Chinese dynastic histories from the third century CE in descriptions of envoys traveling by sea to the court of Queen Himiko. And in the sixth century, the Korean kingdom of Paekche introduced Buddhism to the Japanese court, opening a pathway for active trade, pilgrimage, and cultural influence from the Asian mainland that brought Japan into the orbit of classical East Asian civilization centered on China.

Voyages and maritime trade between Japan, China, and Korea continued for over a millennium, and, although Tokugawa rulers (1603–1868) significantly reduced Japan's contact with Asian neighbors by the eigh-

teenth century, some official (and unofficial) trade continued intermittently with China and Korea throughout the entire Tokugawa period.

One notable incident in the long history of Japanese and Chinese relations was the attempted Mongol invasion in the late thirteenth century, when the Mongol fleet was destroyed in a typhoon off the coast of Kyūshū by what became known as the *kamikaze* (divine wind), a term that regained prominence during World War II referring to Japanese suicide pilots.

It is important to recognize that until the nineteenth century, foreign contact with Japan came from the south or the west through Kyūshū, whether originating in Korea, China, Southeast Asia, or distant Europe. In other words, the Pacific Ocean was not an avenue for trade, communication, or cultural contact. Japan faced west, not east, until Western whaling vessels and clippers in the China trade began to ply the waters of the North Pacific in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Japan and the West

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Japan came into contact with two of the great European maritime empires of the era, the Portuguese and the Dutch. The first recorded European visitors arrived in Japan from Macau, Goa, and other ports of the expanding Portuguese empire in 1542. Over the next century, other Europeans came to trade and proselytize, and by the early seventeenth century, missionary activities led the Tokugawa regime to expel almost all Europeans and restrict Japan's contacts with other Asian foreigners. The southern port of Nagasaki, in Kyūshū, continued to receive trading junks from China until the late seventeenth century.

Among Europeans, only the Dutch were allowed to remain, confined to a tiny trading post on the small island of Deshima in Nagasaki harbor. For the next two centuries, only one or two Western trading ships a year (from the Dutch East India Company) were allowed to visit Deshima, and it was only through this portal that Japan maintained contact and very limited trade with the European world. During this period of enforced seclusion, Japanese fishermen too were prohibited from going abroad, and government specifications for construction of vessels were intentionally designed to make them unfit for ocean navigation.¹ As the story of John Manjirō, the first Japanese to reach the American mainland, illustrates, Japanese fishermen only ended up abroad as a result of shipwrecks or being cast adrift by the late Tokugawa period.

During the centuries when Japan was largely closed to the outside world, the Tokugawa regime also restricted individual travel within the country. Japan's rugged landmass across its mountainous island chain further inhibited land-based travel. However, extensive coastal shipping linked the shōgun's capital, Edo (now Tokyo), to many parts of Japan, especially to Osaka, which was the center of Japanese domestic trade.

Japan's seclusion ended abruptly in 1853 with the arrival of Commodore Matthew Perry and his so-called "Black Ships," different from the small junks with low sterns that were easily swamped and left adrift at the mercy of swift ocean currents. Perry's ships were ocean-going steamships belching black smoke from coal-fueled boilers.² Perry positioned his small fleet in the waters off of Edo, putting the city in the range of his ships' cannons as well as positioning them athwart the critical shipping lanes that connected the city to Osaka and other parts of Japan.

Japan quickly realized that opening her ports to foreign contact was unavoidable. Treaties with the US and other foreign powers opened a limited number of ports to foreign trade, including Nagasaki, Kōbe, and Yokohama. Yokohama in particular became a boomtown, teeming with foreign businessmen, missionaries, diplomats, entertainers, and tourists. Through these treaty ports Japan began to learn in detail about Western institutions and technologies, and within a short span of years, the Japanese government officially launched exhaustive studies of foreign technology, education, and law, particularly after the Meiji Restoration in 1868, which ended the rule of the Tokugawa dynasty and established a new government nominally headed by the Emperor Meiji.



Sunday in Yokohama by Utagawa Sadahide (1807–ca. 1878). Westerners represented by the flags of the “Five Nations.” This image includes Chinese and Indian servants.
Source: MIT Visualizing Cultures website at <http://tinyurl.com/orwew8y>.

Quickly, the new Japanese government embarked on its own colonial expansion. In 1872, Japan annexed the Ryūkyū Kingdom in Okinawa. And through victories in wars with China (1894–95) and Russia (1904–05) Japan acquired Taiwan; political and commercial rights in various parts of China, Manchuria, and Korea; and the northern island of Sakhalin. The Japanese Navy, closely modeled on the British Navy, expanded rapidly and by the 1920s was one of the world’s five great naval powers that agreed to arms limitations through the Washington Naval Treaty (1922) and the London Naval Treaty (1930). In 1936, Japan renounced both treaties, setting off a naval arms race.

Paralleling Japan’s naval strength, Japanese shipping companies grew and extended their routes across the Pacific and throughout East and South Asian waters. (The present-day Mitsubishi conglomerate had its origins in a shipping company founded in 1870, just as Japan was opening up to foreign trade.)

The Japanese Fishing Industry

Historically, Japan’s coastlines were dotted with thousands of tiny fishing hamlets, generally focused on fishing in the immediate coastal waters. Since the 1960s, however, many such hamlets have faced the same problems of rural depopulation that have affected Japan’s countryside everywhere, and the increasingly high-tech equipment and costs of contemporary fisheries technology have driven many traditional fishing communities out of business.

These developments began in the early part of the twentieth century as Japanese fishing started to become industrialized and larger fishing companies were formed to pursue distant water fishing, first in the Pacific then on toward almost all parts of the world. By the 1920s, Japanese fishing fleets had navigated the world and had become, along with naval power and a robust international shipping industry, a pillar of what historian William Tsutsui has called “Japan’s pelagic [ocean-based] empire.”³

In the early twentieth century, seafood products became commodities increasingly important for generating foreign exchange. In particular, the

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Japanese canned seafood industry produced salmon, shrimp, tuna, and whale for export, which in turn enabled imports of industrial commodities such as oil, iron, and rubber.⁴ The Japanese government supported the expansion and industrialization of the fishing industry as an important part of its goal of creating a strong and modern nation. Chalmers Johnson, a leading scholar of Japan’s political economy, cites fisheries as one of the important building blocks in the creation of “industrial policy.”⁵

By the 1930s, Japan had a fishing fleet twice the size of any other nation, and local fishing stocks were becoming increasingly depleted. Japanese vessels were going ever farther out to sea, to the Gulf of Alaska, the coast of Mexico, the Sea of Bengal, and the Arabian Sea.

As Japan militarized in the 1930s, its commercial fishing fleets were increasing commissioned for the war effort. After the naval war in the Pacific began in earnest, ocean-going ships were pressed into service by the Japanese military, young men with maritime skills were drafted into the Navy, and the raw materials used in fishing were rationed and repurposed for the war effort. Japan’s fishing fleet was destroyed in the last years of World War II, and Japan as a nation was near starvation in 1945, not only because of a lack of seafood but also because all forms of Japanese food production were severely damaged.

Fortunately, as Tsutsui notes, the prewar infrastructure of national support of fisheries made it relatively easy to revive the industry after the



The Tsukiji Market as seen from Shiodome. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <http://tiny.cc/dh0vix>.

If one needs any proof of the abundance and variety of fish, shellfish, and other marine products in the daily diets of Japanese, one need only look through the stalls of the famous Tsukiji Market . . .

war, and it was one of the first industries revived under the Allied Occupation of Japan (1945–1952).⁶ Occupation authorities permitted distant-water whaling to resume in 1946, and poured resources into Japan's maritime infrastructure to help relieve the famine conditions that persisted in the wake of wartime destruction. In 1948, the fisheries agency of the Japanese government was established, later combined into the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF). By the end of the Occupation, in 1952, Japan had exceeded the levels of its prewar catches.

With Japan's economic rise after 1955, the fishing industry continued to expand. By the 1960s, flash-freezing aboard large factory ships had become common, and well-organized Japanese fishing fleets (usually a large factory ship with a number of smaller trawlers or other vessels) were hunting fish in every corner of the globe. As prosperity increased, so did Japan's taste for delicious seafood, and Japan's imports of fisheries products exceeded exports by the 1970s.

Though Japan's taste for seafood seemed inexhaustible, the ocean's supply was not, with demand always outstripping supply. Japanese fisheries were first depleted in their coastal waters, and the industry increasingly went to more distant waters to secure their catches. As awareness of the depletion of fisheries stocks increased worldwide, old notions of the freedom of the seas were supplanted by more and more international regulation, and by the early to mid-1970s, the oceanic or global enclosure movement encouraged many nations to institute 200-mile Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) to protect their waters from foreign fishing fleets. These and many other maritime regulations were included in the negotiations that led to the United Nation's Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS, 1973–1982, coming into force in 1994). UNCLOS benefitted Japan profoundly, as the

200-mile limit around its thousands of far-flung islands (including under-sea mineral rights) spanned an offshore area of 1.73 million square miles—twelve times more than its total landmass.⁷ But it also signaled the end of Japan's large-scale distant-water fishing industry, as many of the world's most important fisheries regions are included in other nations' EEZs.

Seafood and Japan

Japan's emergence on the global economic scene in the 1970s as the international business destination *du jour*, coupled with a rejection of hearty, red-meat American fare in favor of healthy cuisine like rice, fish, and vegetables and the appeal of the high-concept aesthetics of Japanese design, all prepared the world for a sushi fad. And so, from what to earlier generations of Americans was an exotic, almost unpalatable ethnic specialty, then to haute cuisine of the most rarefied sort, sushi has become not just cool, but popular. The painted window of a Cambridge, Massachusetts, coffee shop advertises “espresso, cappuccino, carrot juice, lasagna, sushi.” Mashed potatoes with wasabi (horseradish), sushi-ginger relish, and seared sashimi-grade tuna steaks show Japan's growing cultural influence on upscale nouvelle cuisine throughout North America, Europe, and Latin America. Sushi has even become the stuff of fashion, from “sushi” lip gloss, colored the deep red of raw tuna, to “wasabi” nail polish, a soft avocado green.

Fresh seafood is one of the hallmarks of contemporary Japanese cuisine, and if one needs any proof of the abundance and variety of fish, shellfish, and other marine products in the daily diets of Japanese, one need only look through the stalls of the famous Tsukiji Market in central Tokyo, the world's largest wholesale marketplace for fresh and frozen seafood.⁸

Over the course of a year, merchants at Tsukiji sell perhaps 2,000 varieties of seafood, and in any given season, several hundred are available; each of the market's roughly 1,000 stalls stocks its own specialized selection. One stall displays mountains of red and white boiled octopus; in the stall beyond that, trays of golden fried fish cakes; over there, squid still oozing black ink; across the way, fish pâté in neat pink and white blocks. Around the corner, an apprentice wields a meter-long knife to carve an enormous tuna carcass; in the next stall, a woman carefully arranges clams on dozens of trays; further down the aisle, an old man watchfully stands over open crates full of sawdust and wriggling shrimp. The stalls are awash with seafood of almost every conceivable species, shape, color, and size. Black tubs of *unagi* (live eels) stand by a cutting board in one stall; next

Tsukiji stands at the center of a technologically sophisticated, multibillion-dollar international fishing industry, and every day the market's auctions match international supply with the traditional demands of Japanese cuisine, made ever more elaborate by Japan's prosperity and the gentrification of culinary tastes.

door, crates of crabs packed in moist sawdust push out into the aisle. Colorful rows of *hamadai* (fresh snapper), perfectly matched in size, are set off by the blinding whiteness of a Styrofoam carton. Clams spread by the square meter across shallow tanks. Amorphous mounds of *anko* (grayish pink monkfish liver) spill over the edge of trays. The selection is global: slabs of Canadian and Chilean salmon; trays of Thai shrimp; Okhotsk crab; fresh bluefin tuna airfreighted from New York, Istanbul, Adelaide, and Madrid; eels from Hamamatsu; boiled West African octopi; Shikoku sea bream; glittering tubs of fish roe from British Columbia; live lobsters from Nova Scotia; snapper from China; and sea urchin roe from Maine, repackaged in Hokkaidō.

Tsukiji stands at the center of a technologically sophisticated, multibillion-dollar international fishing industry, and every day the market's auctions match international supply with the traditional demands of Japanese cuisine, made ever more elaborate by Japan's prosperity and the gentrification of culinary tastes. Boosters encourage the homey view that Tsukiji is *Tokyo no daidokoro*—Tokyo's kitchen or pantry—but at its peak, in this pantry, more than 1,389 million pounds of seafood worth US \$5.7 billion changed hands the mid-1990s.

Not So Many Fish in the Sea

Despite its massive EEZ and its pelagic fleets in distant oceans beyond any nation's 200-mile limit, the Japanese fishing industry went into sharp decline from the 1980s onward. One important factor was that international overfishing began to become obvious around the world and across many species. Fishing capacity and rising demand in Japan had, in many cases, overstripped supply. Populations of various species were beginning to decline, if not collapse. In the case of whaling, an international moratorium was intended to preserve many species from extinction. In other cases, the situation has been less clear: the actual global size (and eventual fate) of the bluefin tuna population remains hotly contested, as does Japan's role and responsibility in stimulating overfishing of this delicacy. To be fair, demand for tuna has soared around the world in emulation of Japanese culinary trends, and in particular the economic rise of China has put immense pressure on the global trade in tuna and other high-quality seafood.

Quality and scarcity go hand in hand, and at least until March 11, 2011, the Japan "brand" was widely regarded as top of the line in seafood. Perceptions changed with the destruction of roughly 10 percent of the Japanese fishing fleet in the tsunami that followed the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake and the nuclear contamination resulting from the meltdown of three reactors at the Fukushima Dai-ichi Nuclear Plant on the Tōhoku coast.

As noted earlier, the waters off the Sanriku coast of Tōhoku are enriched by the mingling of the warm waters flowing north in the Japan Current (Kuroshio) as it meets the cold, southwardly flowing Okhotsk, or Kurile Current (Oyashio) creating one of the world's most fertile and abundant fishing grounds. The warm Kuroshio swirls together with the cold Oyashio to create giant oceanic eddies (gyres) where fish breed and also where



Japanese Whaling

The capture of whales dates back thousands of years and has been conducted since prehistoric times by many coastal and island cultures, including Japan's. By the eighteenth century, European and North American long-distance whaling took place on an increasingly global scale. The search for whales was motivated by growing demand for whale oil, an important fuel and lubricant at the time, and many whaling centers, such as Massachusetts' New Bedford and Nantucket, became extremely wealthy from the industry.

Because of Japan's seclusion policies in force until the late 1850s, Japanese whaling was limited to coastal waters. In the 1890s, Japan began to adopt US and other Western nations' whaling techniques. By 1897, Japan was utilizing whaling techniques from Norway, one of the leading whaling nations of the era (and today one of Japan's closest allies on whaling issues). In 1934, Japan sent its first whaling fleet to Antarctica with large factory ships that processed captured whales on board.

Japan's whaling fleet, along with its other fisheries, were destroyed during World War II. Because of the threat of nationwide starvation, Allied Occupation (1945–1952) authorities revived Japanese coast whaling immediately, and in 1946 allowed factory ship whaling around Japan's Ogasawara (Bonin) Islands and in Antarctic waters. In 1951, occupied Japan signed the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling, and in 1952, Japanese resumed factory ship whaling in the North Pacific. By the first half of the 1960s, Japan's whaling had surpassed prewar levels. However, by the end of that decade, the International Whaling Commission (IWC), an international commission formed in 1946 to oversee whaling quotas, stock management, and conservation, began the attempt to introduce strict international regulations.

As whaling stocks became radically depleted due to over-exploitation, international sentiment supported a 1982 IWC moratorium on pelagic whaling. In 1986, the IWC institutionalized zero-catch policies, ostensibly limiting whaling to subsistence aboriginal whaling. Japan's system of "scientific" or "research whaling," employed since the 1982 IWC moratorium and conducted by factory-ships off Antarctica, constituted a major exception to IWC regulations. The highly controversial practice was globally debated, condemned, and openly opposed by groups like Greenpeace and the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society. Japan largely ignored the protests until March 31, 2014, when the International Court of Justice, the main UN judicial organ, declared the practice illegal; since then some nationalist politicians have vowed Japan will continue whaling.

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—Victoria Lyon Bestor and Theodore C. Bestor

The 1.73 million square miles within the 200-mile limit around Japan's thousands of far-flung islands comprise a wealth of resources only beginning to be tapped.

nuclear contaminants concentrate. The exact level of contamination is unclear, and the Japanese government has been anything but forthcoming in providing in-depth details and analysis of the disaster. What is known is that the contamination from Fukushima is now ranked second only to the 1986 nuclear plant disaster at Chernobyl in the Ukraine. While Chernobyl is believed to be contained and is being fitted with a new cap to further seal the contents, the radiation from Fukushima continues, and at this moment, there is little concrete knowledge about the effects of the nuclear contamination on fish populations off the Tōhoku coast. But in popular perception, guilt by association taints food products—including seafood—from Fukushima and other parts of Tōhoku.

International Tensions, Resources and Technology, and Rising Waters

Even if the waters off the Sanriku coast remain contaminated for years to come, Japan still controls one of the world's top half-dozen fisheries regions, and the value of that wealth is all the more starkly demonstrated by the current issues of island sovereignty that have caused controversy between Japan and its neighbors. Even tiny specks of uninhabited land have become major points of contention between Japan and China (over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea), between Japan and Korea (over Takeshima/Dokdo Island (the Liancourt Rocks) in the Sea of Japan/East Sea), and between Japan and Russia (over the southernmost four islets of the Kurile chain between Hokkaidō and the Kamchatka Peninsula). However important fisheries resources may be, they are only a small part of these international debates. Questions of nationalism and national pride, and access to undersea mineral rights, are more critical than fishing rights per se.

The 1.73 million square miles within the 200-mile limit around Japan's thousands of far-flung islands comprise a wealth of resources only beginning to be tapped. In addition to the potential for fisheries, new technolo-

gies will make way for mining of minerals from deep ocean waters, giant floating water turbines are envisioned for electrical generation, great untapped sources of geothermal and wind energy may be found or sited in Japanese waters, and the potential for and profit from refined seawater desalination are incalculable.

Going forward, global warming and the melting of the Antarctic ice-cap are now estimated to be unstoppable, with sea levels projected to rise ten feet over the next century. The threat of rising seas is grave for many nations, and Japan—with its population, industries, and other critical infrastructure largely clustered in low-lying coastal areas—will surely be dramatically affected by global climate change. Accuracy or the lack thereof of these dire predictions notwithstanding, anyone who desires to understand Japanese culture will do well to always consider the historic and contemporary significant influences of the sea upon human life on the archipelago. ■

NOTES

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Saturday, February 2, 2013, file photo released by Japan Coast Guard 11th Regional Headquarters shows Japan Coast Guard patrol boats approach a Chinese fishing boat, left, off the northeastern coast of Miyako Island, about 200 kilometers (124 miles) southwest of the disputed islands, called Senkaku in Japan and Diaoyu in China.

Source: *The World Post* website at <http://tinyurl.com/k2yue9u>.