

Thinking of Japan

Pete Knutson talk at Port of Seattle Candlelight Vigil for Japan

It's a usual springtime at Fishermen's Terminal in Seattle. The industry bustles, preparing for the upcoming harvest in the North Pacific. Fishermen mend nets, mechanics overhaul diesels, crews are hired. Boats are hauled out of the water for scraping and a new coat of bottom paint.

Yet as I get my own family's boat ready to fish Alaskan waters, I cannot forget the images of coastal destruction from Shiogama, Ishinomaki and Fukushima. Those boats---longliners, seiners, gillnetters---picked up by the tsunami, upended, rolled over, and cast ashore like a child's toy boat.

Each one of those boats represents a life, many lives, many dreams, the pride of a family business.

Thirty four years ago I traveled through the fishing ports on the Eastern shore of Honshu Island, north of Tokyo and Chiba. In my offseason from fishing, I was writing an article on Japanese fishermen and the newly created 200 mile fishing zone.

One night in Japan, a fishermen's co-operative in Choshi, a small village, hosted me in their hall. These young fishermen told me how they were fighting to protect the Tonegawa River. They showed me their village aquaculture projects. They wanted to know all the details about me: whether I'd met any Japanese girls, was I descended from Vikings, did men die quickly in Alaskan waters? We sang songs. They taught me a Japanese love song. They knew all the words to Where Have All the Flowers Gone. When it was my turn on the guitar, I taught them a Country Joe tune with the refrain "And it's one, two, three, what are we fighting for?" We drank lots of saki that night.

The next morning one fisherman, Mamoru Itoh, took me fishing offshore for sardines on his family's proud purse seiner the Itoh Maru. His crew were older village men, who came aboard each carrying their carefully wrapped bento box. Through gesture his crew told me that Mamoru was a good skipper; he only put the net out when the fish were there. And that's what he did; he made one very good set for many tons of sardines.

So now as I refit my own gillnetter at the shipyard, I wonder what happened to those fishermen and their families who shared their lives in an exchange with a young American so many years ago.

We as fishing people live with the knowledge that life is precarious. The memorial monument at Fishermen's Terminal testifies to how human endeavor pales before the power of the elements, an insight captured by the Japanese artist Hokusai in his woodblock print, The Great Wave Off Kanegawa.

There is only so much that you can do to prepare. And yet we have to prepare.

That is a traditional lesson in humility from Choshi, from Fishermen's Terminal in Seattle, from every fishing village. There are limits to human power. All human systems can fail. Boats go down. The unfolding events at Fukushima show us how our common industrial culture has forgotten this traditional lesson.

We need to separate the tsunami from the nuclear disaster. The tsunami was a natural event for which the Japanese had prepared as well as anyone on the planet. The nuclear disaster is a cultural event brought to us by people who did not recognize they had engineered a technology beyond their ability to control, creating a failure beyond their ability to imagine.

So let's keep those fishing people of Honshu and those workers at Fukushima in our thoughts and in our hearts.

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