

THE PATH TO TAIJI



EMBEDDED WITH DAVID RASTOVICH AND HIS MISSION TO SAVE THE CETACEANS

BY STEVE BARILOTTI

"If you can't do great things, then do small things in a great way."
—Gandhi

HALLOWEEN, 2007

Leaving Kyoto, two stops to Shinagawa Station. We are hurtling along at a disconcerting rate, averaging 150 mph on the straightaways. So fast that we create a mini sonic boom when exiting a long tunnel, blasting out like the bullet this train is named for. Out the window a blur of industrialized, tropical landscape pickets by: bucolic, green, woodcut rice paddies sprouting Good Smile fishcake factories and dingy apartment blocks. Our car, rocking maternally, is loaded with somnolent mid-level office *samurai* nodding off over their canned coffee and thick *manga* comics. If they have noted our slovenly *gaijin* presence, they make no outward sign of it.

Across the aisle, Justin Krumb, director/producer of *Minds In The Water*, is sacked out behind black wraparounds and an impenetrable hitman goatee. He's the biggest man on the train, a foot taller and roughly twice the size of the average Tokyo *sarariman* sitting in our car. This makes him an easy track; especially since the Wakayama police took down everybody's passport vitals following the second Taiji event less than 48 hours ago.

I rehearse our exit plan while attempting to decipher my set of *kanji*-printed tickets, all three required to cross the electronic turnstiles within the ant-farm labyrinth of Shinagawa Station. One cross-platform change of trains, then a 45-minute feeder line to Narita International. Barring any extended backroom discussions with Japanese customs officials, who may or may not have us on a watch list, we should board our flight by 3:00 and be deplaning at LAX 12 hours later in time for an honest breakfast burrito.

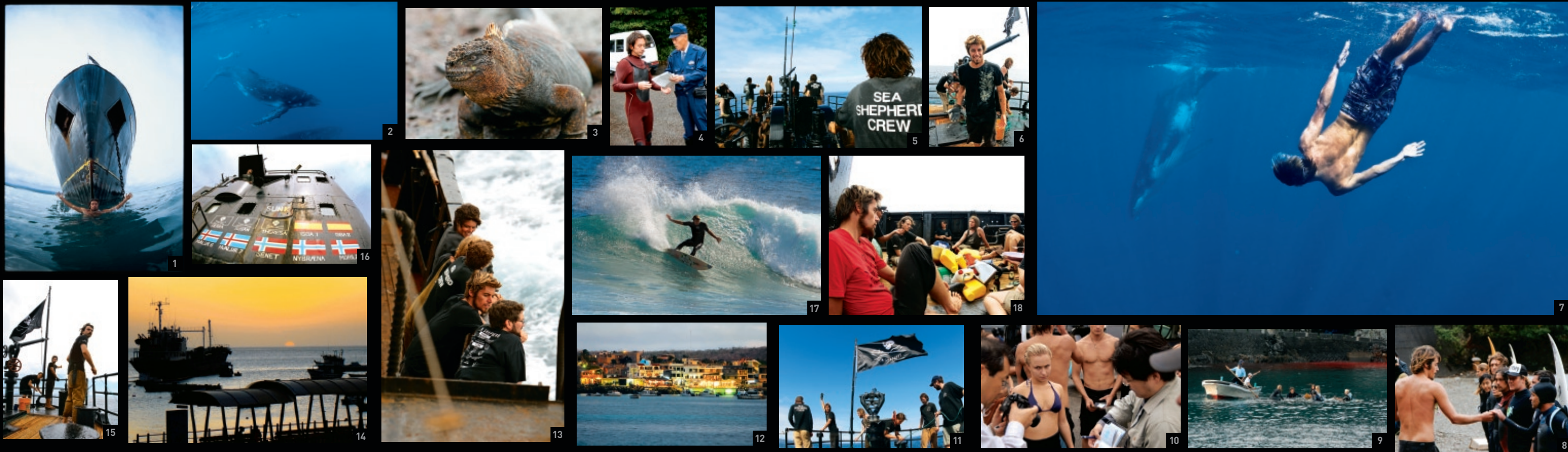
Slowing for Nagoya, approaching 10:00 a.m. By now the Rastovich's should be checking out of the Osaka Hilton under assumed names and trailing us to Tokyo on a later train.

Last night around 9:00 word had come up from our friends in Taiji that Monday's action had so infuriated the local fishermen that they were demanding the arrest of the six paddlers—Dave Rastovich, his wife Hannah, *Heroes* star Hayden Panettiere, pro surfer Karina Petroni, journalist Peter Heller, and Australian actress Isabel Lucas—who had crossed the enclosure net in the small "killing cove" just after dawn to paddle up and pay tribute to a small pod of pilot whales and their calves awaiting slaughter.

Two days previous, Rastovich had organized and held a much larger event with more than 25 paddlers. But the fishermen having been tipped off that some sort of action was brewing, had taken down the nets and sanitized up the cove. The ceremony, while somber, went off peaceably with the fishermen glowering from the overlook.

But as soon as the surfer caravan rounded the corner out of town, the nets went up ►

TED GRAMBEAU



1. THE FARLEY MOWAT WAS REPUDEDLY A COLD WAR SPY VESSEL UNTIL BECOMING SEA SHEPHERD'S FLAGSHIP IN THE MID-1990S. 2. "BABY" HUMPBAC WHALE—20 FEET LONG AND OVER 10,000 POUNDS—OFF TONGA. 3. GALAPAGOS IGUANA. 4. FOLLOWING THE FIRST PADDLE-OUT CEREMONY, POLICE ASKED TO SEE PROTESTORS' PASSPORTS AND TOOK THEIR PHOTO. 5. THE FARLEY'S CREW. 6. RASTOVICH, ON DECK. 7. AFTER SWIMMING WITH HUMPBACKS IN TONGA, RASTA RECALLED THE GIANTS SINGING SO LOUDLY IT FELT LIKE THE RUMBLING REVERB OF A ROCK CONCERT. 8. PRE PADDLE-OUT AT AT TAIJI. RASTA ASKED EVERYONE TO TAKE A MOMENT TO REMEMBER THE SPIRIT OF THE THOUSANDS OF DOLPHINS WHO HAD MET THEIR END HERE. 9. OVER THE COURSE OF 30 YEARS, CONFRONTATIONS BETWEEN LOCAL FISHERMEN AND OUTSIDE PROTESTORS HAS GROWN INCREASINGLY BITTER, AND AT TIMES, VIOLENT. 10. HEROS STAR, HAYDEN

PANETTIERE, BEING SNAPPED BY THE LOCAL POLICE—PAPARAZZI STYLE. 11. THE FARLEY'S ALL-VOLUNTEER CREW—PIERCED, TATTOOED, DREADHEADED, AND IDEALISTIC. 12. PUERTO BAQUERIZO MORENO, THE SLEEPY CAPITAL OF THE GALAPAGOS ON SAN CRISTÓBAL. 13. MANNING THE RAIL. 14. PUERTO AYORA, ISLA SANTA CRUZ, GALAPAGOS. 15. THE "CANNON" (SEEN LEFT) DELIVERS SEAWATER, NOT SHELLS AGAINST ILLEGAL WHALERS. 16. SEA SHEPHERD'S TALLY: 10 PIRATE WHALERS SUNK OR SCUTTLED AT THE DOCK WITH NO INJURY OR LOSS OF LIFE. 17. THE GALAPAGOS ARE RICH IN ECOLOGICAL DIVERSITY AS WELL AS WAVES. RASTA, ENJOYING. 18. IN THE GALAPAGOS, WHEN THE FARLEY'S CREW CAME ACROSS AN ILLEGAL LONGLINE SET BY LOCAL POACHERS, PULLING IT IN WAS AN ALL-DAY TASK THAT EVENTUALLY YIELDED OVER NINE MILES OF PLASTIC LINE AND 270 BAITED HOOKS.

and approximately 25 pilot whales were herded in. When word of the killing reached Rastovich back in Osaka, he immediately organized a smaller crew to make a stealth return to the cove for a second ceremony in full view of the butchered whales.

While the "trespassing" charge would not likely stick, a more serious indictment of "conspiracy to disrupt trade" could. It was more likely the authorities were interested in confiscating the footage than detaining a group of foreign surfers who had paddled into a culturally sensitive part of Japan. But under Japanese law anybody can be held for up to three weeks without charge.

In any case, Dave and the others were in no mood to dally once the sleeping dragon had been stirred. By midnight, Dave, Hannah, Justin, and myself quietly slipped out from the hotel basement and hailed taxis. Our boards were left behind in the lobby as decoys to throw off the front desk.

In my front pocket rests a matchbox-sized videocassette marked "Taiji #2." The bulk of the Japan footage had been FedExed out yesterday just in case the insidious reach of the Japanese Fishery Agency—quite possibly the most powerful actor in Japanese politics today—decided to toss our rooms and steal embarrassing evidence of systematic and quite horrific cetacean genocide.

Beyond the routine paranoia associated with extended sleep deprivation, this is a quite real possibility in a polite police state such as Japan. The government has been thoroughly effective thus far in suppressing the dolphin-kill and mercury-contamination issues in the mainstream Japanese media or dismissing it as outside anti-Japanese propaganda. And then there were those disconcerting clicks and hums on our hotel phones. Or the rumored visit from a quiet yet menacing gentleman representing the "Fishing Cooperative" that prompted many of our Japanese surfer friends to pull out of the event last minute.

This tape—less than 45 minutes long—holds an uncomfortable primal reality that most people and surfers, including myself, don't want to confront. That each year, in small, rural coves such as the ones found in the village of Taiji, more than 20,000 dolphins and small whales are routinely rounded up, gutted with long flensing knives, and allowed to slowly and agonizingly bleed out over the course of 20 minutes or more.

Up until Monday, the killings and blood-dyed waters of the cove had been an abstraction, an easily clicked-through YouTube clip. What Rastovich and the others confronted face-to-face was a chaotic charnel house filled with families of terrified, thrashing, dying dolphins—what former Flipper-trainer-turned-anti-captivity-campaigner Ric O'Barry calls "Dante's Dolphin Hell."

The Taiji fishermen for their part seem to be at a breaking point from the ongoing pressure from a growing onslaught of meddlesome Westerners bent on shutting down their livelihood. There has been escalating yelling and shoving, the fishermen devolving quickly from their normally genial *tatemae*, the placid smiling exterior reserved for foreigners or anyone outside of the small, traditional fishing village whose whaling roots stretch back more than 400 years.

In reality, however, what's driving these slaughters is not tradition, but a lot of money. Not so much for the meat but the captive dolphin trade where a healthy young female (that can presumably breed in captivity) can fetch \$100,000 to \$300,000 on the black market. As the world fisheries collapse from overfishing and pollution, the traditional coastal fishermen are being forced to make money where they can. The supreme black irony is that the locals are eating the mercury-laden mammals and feeding it to their schoolkids, literally poisoning themselves with greed and heavy metals.

Just after dawn Monday, after discovering Rastovich and the

others forming a traditional surfer's memorial circle next to the pilot whales, three fishermen charged in on their fishing boat and began screaming at the crew of surfers to leave immediately and quit disrupting their business. When the paddlers held their ground, the fishermen jostled them with boat poles and backed towards them brandishing a spinning outboard prop. Mostly it was a bluff, but some of the crew sustained light bruises. Once the fishermen spotted the small armada of cameramen on the beach and heard the small remote-controlled camera helicopter buzzing overhead, they sped off in a fruitless attempt to intercept the media.

By this time Rastovich decided they had made their point and paddled the crew in. As seen in the resulting footage that would be broadcast worldwide within 12 hours, the paddlers were clearly traumatized by the carnage. Hayden and Hannah were weeping on the beach while Rastovich, visibly shaken and distracted, muttered, "Fuckin' hard to walk away...fuckin' hard..." as he hurriedly stuffed the boards in the waiting van. They ducked low as speeding police, sirens wailing, sped by them on their way out of town back to Osaka.

As we make the last sprint for Tokyo, I close my eyes and do a mental montage of the last year's production. Ten months, seven Pacific Rim locations: Hawaii, Australia, Alaska, California, Galapagos, Tonga, and finally Japan. While this journey ostensibly started as a documentary film, in fast-forward it's blurred into a full-blown cause, complete with a website and an international online "visual petition" to help protect surfing's most beloved and iconic animals.

For Rastovich, the critical path to Taiji began last November with a visit from the controversial but charismatic Paul Watson—a hero to some and an eco-pirate to others—notorious for having once sunk half the Icelandic whaling fleet (at the dock without loss of life). Watson, the founder of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, has

roamed the seas for the last 30 years on a motley collection of aging, leaking ships dubbed "Neptune's Navy," in a Quixotic but highly visible attempt to protect the ocean and all her creatures.

Over the two-hour conversation, Watson laid it out straight for Rasta: The oceans are dying and most of us, surfers included, are standing by and letting it happen. The fisheries are in collapse, reefs are bleaching at an unprecedented rate, and in places like the Gulf of Mexico there are ecological deadzones the size of Connecticut. Despite a worldwide moratorium on whaling enacted in 1986, whaling countries such as Japan and Norway under a "scientific research" loophole have killed more than 30,000 whales. Dolphins, which are small whales, are afforded little to no protection on the open seas.

Rastovich stated he was willing to do whatever it took to stop the slaughter in Taiji, even if it meant cutting nets and risking injury and arrest. Watson, however, gave Rasta an even tougher challenge: use his celebrity within the surfing world to bring awareness to the threats facing dolphins and other marine mammals. It would be on his watch to enlist other top surfers to the cause.

For Rastovich, the prospect of breaking out of the pro-surfer comfort bubble and becoming a public speaker, and potential target, was as daunting as facing the drop at a 10-foot Off-The-Wall closeout. But he was eager to give it a try.

In Rasta's wobbly yet determined baby steps as a newbie activist were the seeds of a film. By January we had assembled our team and roughed out a year's production schedule. Our working title, *Minds In The Water*, was borrowed from a beautiful but out-of-print collection of cetacean essays published 30 years previous.

Using the annual Byron Bluesfest as the launching pad, we began the "visual petition," a bit of entry-level activism where we would ▶



THE VISUAL PETITION, A CONCEPT BORROWED FROM THE ARGENTINEAN MOTHERS OF THE "DISAPPEARED" WHO HELD VIGIL SHOWING PHOTOS OF THEIR VANISHED LOVED ONES, IS A WAY FOR SURFERS AND CETACEAN LOVERS TO BOTH REMEMBER THE THOUSANDS OF DOLPHINS AND WHALES KILLED EACH YEAR WHILE AT THE SAME TIME GIVING A FACE TO THE PEOPLE WHO CELEBRATE SHARING THE OCEAN WITH THESE AMAZING ANCIENT ANIMALS. THE PETITION WILL BE FORMALLY PRESENTED TO THE INTERNATIONAL WHALING COMMISSION BY RASTOVICH AND OTHERS WHEN THE IWC CONVENES IN CHILE NEXT MAY. TO FIND OUT MORE AND ADD YOUR FACE, PLEASE VISIT MINDSINTHEWATER.COM

personally rally concertgoers and musicians to have their picture taken with a custom dolphin or whale portrait. This proved to be a friendly icebreaker to introduce the dolphin-kill issue to the majority of people who were unaware of the problem. In Byron, a former whaling town transformed into a New Age whale and dolphin-watching Mecca, it was a no-brainer. Backstage we were able to get the likes of Taj Mahal, Wolfmother, Jack Johnson, and Ben Harper to sign on. The petitions, hopefully thousands of them, will be presented to officials of the International Whaling Commission when they convene in Chile in May of 2008.

A week later we decamped to Bells and did the same with the ASP Top 10 while lurking about the competitors' warm-up area. Of all the pros, Kelly Slater seemed the most keen to know more, quizzing Rasta at length and pledging to help out in some way in the future. Heartened on the response he got from his fellow pros, Rasta pressed on.

In May, a five-day visit to the International Whaling Commission in Anchorage convinced Rastovich that nearly 30 years of diplomacy and toothless treaties had done little to nothing to prevent ongoing cetacean slaughter. Direct action of some form was needed.

A month later Rastovich found himself off the Galapagos Islands aboard the *Farley Mowat*, the Sea Shepherd's flagship and battered veteran of many campaigns. Painted a menacing black and flying an eco-Jolly Roger, the all-vegan ship was crewed mainly by an eclectic band of 20-something idealists and hard-line enviros dedicated to doing something, anything, to stop the wholesale rape of the ocean.

The mission was to patrol Galapagos waters—a UN-charted ocean sanctuary—for international and locally based fish poachers who are decimating shark populations (and most everything else) in the sanctuary zone. Over the course of three days at sea, Rastovich helped to haul in over nine-miles of illegal longline, at one point diving under the ship to cut free a rat's nest of hook-infested lines that had snagged near the *Farley's* massive steel propeller.

Rastovich reveled in this sort of direct concrete action. Most surfers are risk takers by nature, and when channeled in the right direction, that same quick thinking and go-for-it attitude in big waves can carry the day in hairy situations.

On the run-up to Taiji, however, Rastovich was faced with the

most challenging role of his career: becoming a de facto tour guide and event marshal for more than 50 international surfers, musicians, actors, photographers, filmmakers, translators, and assorted Japanese supporters who had gathered in Osaka at his request.

"You can really be an effective force, no matter your size or your financial scenario," reflected Rastovich afterwards. "When you have the element of pure motivation and compassion, all the other little details just come together. Based on this action I'm totally convinced surfers would make great activists and defenders of the ocean in so many ways. So really, it's just a matter of taking that first small step."

I feel the train decelerate and a musical chime pings. A recorded voice, a young woman speaking demure rapid-fire Japanese, welcomes us to Tokyo. Please remember your belongings.

I nudge big Justin awake and collect my bags. As an afterthought I pat my pocket for reassurance. Small steps, small things. Could a two-ounce cassette encoded with an inconvenient truth be the catalyst for a huge sea change in reversing our seemingly irreversible rush towards wholesale planetary collapse? Highly unlikely.

But worth a swing? Definitely. ➔

Postscript: In the week following the Taiji action there was a worldwide media blitz ranging from CNN to Reuters to People Magazine. Visual petitions shot up and continue to pour in. Japanese mainstream media, however, has drawn a near-virtual blackout over the event.

To sign up for the Visual Petition:
MindsInTheWater.com

Video of the 2007 Galapagos longlining campaign:
SeaShepherd.org

For an in-depth account of the Taiji event see "Dolphin Diaries":
Surfermag.com/features/onlineexclusives/dolphin-diary-2/