

## The red coral poaching problem in Ogasawara Islands in Japan

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### 1. Introduction

The issue I would like to share with the other participants via my paper and presentation is red coral poaching by Chinese fishing boats inside Japan's exclusive economic zone around the Ogasawara Islands in the Pacific Ocean. The Japanese government places strict controls on the catching of red coral, but it is in danger of extinction now. This is not an issue in the South China Sea, but many things can be compared with the issues that arise in the South China Sea and Chinese boats also poach coral and turtles in the area.

This poaching case has led the Japanese government to revise relevant laws to raise the upper limit of a fine, but the effectiveness of these measures is uncertain. The red coral poaching case in Japan certifies that if poachers aim for the marine resources in another country's waters, countermeasures by just one country do not work. It is necessary for relevant governments in the South China Sea to cooperate in order to make multilateral rules.

In this paper, I would discuss the overview of the issue, measures the Japanese government and Chinese government took and the possibilities of building a multilateral framework of relevant countries.

### 2. About Red Coral

According to the Japan Coral Association (JCA), red coral belongs to a group of hard coral which grow at a very slow rate at a depth of more than 100 meters (328 feet) where no sunlight reaches.

Red coral jewelry has attracted people worldwide since ancient times because of its luster when polished. In Germany, coral beads have been found among 25,000-year-old Paleolithic relics. The ancient Romans put coral in cradles, praying for the healthy growth of a child, and soldiers went to war wearing coral as a charm against evil. Mediterranean coral was brought to Japan from locations along the Silk Road and is now found among the treasures of the Shoso-in, the Imperial Treasure Repository in the city of Nara, Japan. Red coral has more than just decorative significance in the Islamic and Hindu as well as Christian and Buddhist religions, which all use coral as amulets while some use them as prayer beads.

In China, since the color red is very popular, red coral is one of the most popular jewels, as well as jade. A recent strong demand among the wealthy Chinese for jewelry and ornaments made out of red coral has caused the price to rise sharply in China. A type of red coral known as "ox blood" is being sold for 10,000 yuan (or roughly ¥190,000) per gram in specialty stores in Shanghai. The red coral that the poachers take from Japan's EEZ is sold to traders in China for an estimated 500,000 yuan (roughly

¥9.5 million) per kilogram.<sup>1</sup> Recent overexploiting in China caused a sharp decline of red coral, which drove the Chinese government to designate red coral to the endangered species list to protect it the way giant pandas are.

### **3. Area of Production**

According to the Jca, precious coral is harvested mostly in the western Pacific, including Japanese waters, and the Mediterranean Sea.

The habitats around Japan are in the sea south of Tokyo from Hachijojima Island to the Ogasawara Islands, off the coast of Wakayama Prefecture, Kochi prefecture and southern Kyushu, and the waters from the Goto Islands to the Ryukyu Islands. Among them, Cape Muroto and Cape Ashizuri in Kochi Prefecture, Amami-Oshima Island and Tanegashima Island in Kagoshima Prefecture, southern Kyushu, and Okinawa Island and Miyako-jima Island in Okinawa Prefecture are major harvesting areas. In the waters around the Ogasawara Islands, only four local entities are allowed to catch red coral with the Tokyo Metropolitan Government's approval<sup>2</sup>.

Other western Pacific habitats are found over a wide area spreading from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Hainan Island to Vietnam and further south to Indonesia.

### **4. Harvesting Method**

Harvesting red coral must be executed with extreme caution to prevent overexploitation.

On the sea bottom off the coast of Muroto and Ashizuri in Tosa Bay, Kochi Prefecture in the western part of Japan, large amounts of collapsed, broken pieces have accumulated. Some harvesters say they are in layers. A coral net developed in the Edo period (1603-1868), is very useful for retrieving them. Gem-quality parts are taken out and used for jewelry. Among the portions harvested are the highly prized, very dark red or "ox-blood" red coral pieces, a rare variety.

Coral-harvesting boats operate under the adjustment rule of the prefecture and must receive permission to operate. Areas to harvest, rope length from the boat to the nets, harvesting periods and operating hours are strictly regulated. Catch data is also required to be submitted.

Collapsed pieces or colonies which satisfy a certain size are lifted with the manipulator arm on the ROV (Remotely Operated Vehicles) while being checked visually for the species, shape and quality. A coral colony fanning out like a peacock's open tail feathers can be raised intact from the deep ocean floor. The ROV has made it possible to harvest coral selectively.

The ROV has also contributed to research on coral preservation by collecting precious coral samples and information from the bottom.

### **5. Poaching by Chinese fishing boats**

Even though there are regulations set by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government regarding harvesting coral in the waters off the Ogasawara Islands, an increasing number of Chinese fishing boats have been poaching red coral in the area since mid-September, 2014. The number of Chinese ships —

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<sup>1</sup> The Japan Times "The red coral poaching problem", Nov 24, 2014

<sup>2</sup> The Japan Times "The red coral poaching problem", Nov 24, 2014

apparently from Fujian Province — operating in the waters peaked at 212 on Oct. 30, 2014<sup>3</sup>. The poachers drop nets with weights attached to the sea bottom, but their methods are so rough that they destroy coral in the water.

Damages for that coral, however, cannot be estimated since no coral harvesting has been implemented recently and no one knows how much coral inhabited the area originally.

The question is why Chinese fishing boats came to an area so far from China, which is 2000 km away, without any information on habitat of red coral. Fishing in such distant area might result in losses considering fuel cost. This poaching creates mistrust among the Japanese people. A popular weekly magazine published an article that claimed the Chinese government led the poaching. In the article, a Japanese expert pointed out “When the poachers’ real purpose was a poaching, they shall sneak into the waters with less amount of fishing boats and harvest. Their real intention might be to disturb Japanese coast guard system.” A military expert pointed out “Maritime militia might be on board in those fishing boats. The purpose might be to assess the abilities of the Japan Coast Guard and Maritime Self Defense Forces. They might evaluate coast guard ability of Japan and detect frequencies for communication”<sup>4</sup>.

These are extreme opinions but typical examples which show the deteriorated Japan-China relationship.

## 6. How Japan Dealt with the Incident

The Japanese Coast Guard could only deploy a few war vessels to the waters around the Ogasawara Islands since many war vessels were deployed to the waters around the Senkaku Islands over which both Japanese and Chinese governments claim territorial rights. They arrested only 6 Chinese skippers who have been poaching red coral in Japanese waters and Japan’s EEZ on charges of violating the Fisheries Act even though hundreds of fishing boats were in the area by mid-november.<sup>5</sup> These skippers were prosecuted and put on trial, but it only resulted in imprisonment with probation and a fine of a few million yen. Therefore, more and more poachers who wanted to make a fortune in one stroke came to the waters, which resulted in increasing the upper limit on fines to 30 million yen (around 250 thousand US dollars) by the Japanese government.<sup>6</sup>

The Japanese government asked the Chinese government to regulate those poachers. In a landmark summit in Beijing in November 2014, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe asked Chinese President Xi Jinping to take appropriate steps to stop the poaching of red coral.<sup>7</sup> The Japanese foreign minister said that the government provided the Chinese government with videos and images which recorded the poaching<sup>8</sup>.

According to the Chinese media, the public security authority of Fujian province started tightening regulations from the end of October and exposed 11 cases by the end of November. 38 kg of red corals were confiscated which were equivalent to 16,000,000 yuan (about 300 million yen or 2.5 million US dollars). Even though the details were not disclosed, the authority reported arresting 31 suspects on

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<sup>3</sup> The Japan Times “The red coral poaching problem”, Nov 24, 2014

<sup>4</sup> Weekly Flash “赤サンゴ密漁は隠れ蓑…中国漁船200隻「正体は海上民兵」”, Nov 25, 2014

<sup>5</sup> The Asahi Shimbun “「密漁船」再び増加か 小笠原周辺に117隻”, Nov 14, 2014

<sup>6</sup> The Asahi Shimbun “外国密漁船の罰金増 3千万円に 政府が方針”, Nov 12, 2014

<sup>7</sup> The Asahi Shimbun “緊急連載 日中首脳会談：中) 歓迎・懐疑、異なる反応”, Nov 12, 2014

<sup>8</sup> The Asahi Shimbun “サンゴ密漁「中国に映像提供」 岸田外相”, Nov 17, 2014

suspicion of poaching and illegally selling coral. This arrest showed the strict attitude of the Chinese authority against these illegal activities.<sup>9</sup>

## 7. Conclusion—Building an international framework of relevant countries

The same issues regarding protecting valuable resources and species from illegal acts have also arisen in the South China Sea, including the poaching of sea turtles and coral in the past.<sup>10</sup> Appropriate measures need to be taken to prevent these illegal acts through multilateral cooperation.

In the Mediterranean, where precious coral are harvested, basin countries organized the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean to preserve and control marine species, including red coral. It prescribes the tools to harvest and the allowable sizes of red coral which can be harvested.<sup>11</sup> Coral is endangered, not only due to overexploiting by poaching, but also due to die-off which might be caused by global warming. To preserve and pass this beautiful coral to the next generation, Japan, China and neighboring countries must establish a framework to investigate, control and preserve coral.



Red coral ornament

<http://www.coral-kochi.jp/craft/craft.html>

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<sup>9</sup> The Asahi Shimbun “中国当局、31人拘束 サンゴ密漁船の拠点”, Dec 13, 2014

<sup>10</sup> The Asahi Shimbun “(社説)サンゴ密漁 中国の対処を求める”, Nov 6, 2014

<sup>11</sup> The Asahi Shimbun “赤サンゴ密漁、狙われた九州 鹿児島・沖縄、中国船が違法操業”, Dec 7, 2014