



November 14, 2014

The Chinese Poachers: Good Source for Red Coral—and Information

The following essay appeared on [The Diplomat website](#) on November 13

JUN OKUMURA

VISITING RESEARCHER AT MEIJI
INSTITUTE FOR GLOBAL AFFAIRS



A GRADUATE OF TOKYO UNIVERSITY, HE WORKED MAINLY METI ON INTERNATIONAL TRADE, ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENT AND OTHER ISSUES. AFTER LEAVING THE CIVIL SERVICE, HE HAS PLAYED ADVISORY ROLES FOR THE EURASIA GROUP AND NASIC. HE IS OFTEN APPEARS IN THE OVERSEAS MEDIA ON JAPANESE POLITICS AND POLICY ISSUES AS WELL AS INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS.

There's talk out there that the Chinese red coral poachers swarming the Japanese EEZ waters near the Ogasawa and Izu Islands right through the preparations and after-party of the November 10 bilateral summit in Beijing between Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Chinese President Xi Jinping are agents of the Chinese maritime authorities. It's plausible, but highly unlikely. But they don't have to be in order to be useful to the Chinese government. And I do expect the problem to abate in the near future. Let me make my case.

That the Chinese maritime authorities are capable of such an act is beyond doubt. They have a large number of deputized ocean-going fishing vessels in their pay to assist the surveillance authorities, a fact which they make little attempt to hide. Fishing vessels have been harbingers of more aggressive moves by the Chinese maritime authorities as well as the PLA Navy, particularly in the contested areas in the South China Sea. And this would not be the first time that the Chinese government has engaged in provocative acts just as they are about to make mutually conciliatory gestures with a geopolitical adversary (case in point: the Xi-Modi summit and the China-India Ladakh faceoff).

But the Ogasawara and Izu neighborhood would be a strange place to seek provocation. It is within the Japanese EEZ as recognized under international law, and, unlike the Senkaku Islands and its surroundings or the areas under contention in the South China Sea, the Chinese government does not dispute this point. Indeed, anything that the Chinese authorities might attempt through the fishing boats would be a first in this respect. Moreover, it would have to be conducted surreptitiously, which entails risk of security breaches, as some of

the vessels are inevitably detained and searched and their crews questioned, all by the Japanese Coast Guard.

Besides, there is no shortage of ocean-going Chinese vessels in private hands that can be refitted to trawl the less exploited Japanese waters, if they have not already been so equipped for domestic use. As the Chinese red coral market has exploded, it would be no surprise if scores, even hundreds, of such vessels showed up unprompted by the proper Chinese authorities to hunt for red coral.

Whenever suspicion of subterfuge is raised, I always go with the simplest explanation, the one that requires the least secrecy on the part of large groups of people, many of whom would be considerable risks to be included in any conspiracy. In my view, these poachers are acting on their own, freebooters without government support or encouragement.

My conclusion does not preclude the possibility of some involvement by Chinese authorities. After all, there is valuable information to be had regarding the Japanese response to exactly the kind of situation that would serve as cover for a non-military landing operation regarding the Senkaku Islands. But given the risk of detection, vessels and their personnel under government influence, if any, would be few and far between, and would be equipped and behave like run-of-the-mill poachers, limiting their usefulness. Thus, the authorities might as well just take in the poaching vessels and their crew that were detained, charged, and released by the Japanese authorities and pump them for information in their turn. That should lead to many other vessels and crews being identified and similarly surveyed, given the high likelihood of these poachers operating in groups and the generally assumed persuasiveness of the Chinese interrogation process.

Now, I have no connection to the Japanese authorities on this issue—which is why I can speculate freely on this subject—but I am sure that they are studying the matter with the same interest as their Chinese counterparts. Both sides will take their conclusions and incorporate them into future plans. And so the cat-and-mouse (a very big mouse and growing at that) will continue.

Finally, let me offer a little prediction, as a coda of sorts. The poaching will abate fairly soon. The Chinese authorities know the identities of the detained vessels and their crew members, and they will proceed from there, as I have already mentioned. I expect them to shut down the operations as best they can, largely because of the loss of face if they are unable to do so. Oh, a few vessels will continue to show up; as the Japanese supply dries up, the rewards will grow exponentially, bringing in new entrants as well as those that escaped the long arm of Chinese law. But it will be in the interests of the Chinese authorities to crack down.

Of course, I could be wrong. And that's when it will get interesting. For it either means that the Chinese government doesn't mind incensing the Japanese government and public, at least on this issue, or that the Xi Jinping regime has less control over the provinces than I'd expected. I cannot make up my mind which would be the more troubling.