

The Women Divers of Jeju

A 400-year old practice, unique to the village of Jeju in South Korea, is recognized and safeguarded by the government

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Seaweed diver Kim Yong Ja is 73 years old. Part of a community of divers of Jeju in South Korea for whom diving for seaweed and seafood is a way of life, Kim Yong Ja started diving at the young age of 14. She began by accompanying her mother who was an experienced diver. She also attended school and worked on the family farm. Kim Yong Ja still goes out diving four days a week. Each trip is three or four hours long. She claims that she is as able and healthy as any of the younger women divers.

I met Kim Yong Ja as part of a field trip to the International Museum of Women organized for the participants of the Asia Pacific Fisheries Conference (APFIC) held in Jeju, South Korea recently. This museum vividly documents and preserves the history and practices associated with traditional forms of livelihood. We were greeted by a group of 25 women divers from Jeju who, through a programme of song and dance, brought alive for us the main features of their unique way of life.

Chatting afterwards with Kim Yong Ja with the help of an interpreter, I came to realize what a challenging life she had led. In her younger days, they did not have the protective diving suits that they now have, which helps them brave the cold water and remain submerged for long periods, resurfacing with catch that is dropped into baskets floating above. Today divers wear rubber swim suits and goggles. However, no other scuba gear is used. At the end of each trip, Kim Yong Ja hands

over the catch to the village co-operative, the Eochongae, from whom she receives about 98 per cent of the sale price.

Things, however, are no longer as they used to be. There is much less catch. But Kim Yong Ja is happy that she is paid a minimum wage by the government, which allows her community the right to pursue its traditional form of livelihood regardless of catch volumes. Kim Yong Ja is a member of the Haenyo, an organization of women divers. The Haenyo works as an autonomous and decentralized local organization, managing diving operations as well as laying down rules of work and extraction in demarcated areas of coastal waters to which it has access rights.

Since 1960, in recognition of the 400 year-old practice of diving, the South Korean government has granted customary rights to diving communities. Marketing co-operatives have also been setup by the State. It is evident that the government is not only keen to manage resources but also to safeguard the women diver's traditional way of life and culture. As a result, the Haenyo is on the itinerary of most tourists, a tribute to the government's farsightedness. The job of the women divers may be physically difficult but they engage in it with pride and joy. ▣

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Women divers of Jeju in South Korea for whom diving for seaweed and seafood is a way of life