

Living under Nature's Wing

Are you feeling adventurous? If so, spread your wings and travel 90 km southeast of Taiwan, where you'll discover a part of the country unlike any other. Known as Lanyu or Orchid Island, this tiny drop of earth in the Pacific is home to the Tao, Taiwan's only ocean-dependent indigenous tribe. The Tao people are the people of the "alibangbang," or flying fish, one of Mother Nature's greatest gifts. The annual flying fish season is at the heart of Tao culture and comes with many traditions and taboos.

Spanning around eight months of the year, the flying fish season involves multiple customs and rituals. A special religious ceremony, usually held in February, marks the beginning of this important period and ensures a prosperous and plentiful season. Tao boat captains head to the beach with elaborate costumes on. There, they pray and make sacrifices to appeal to the flying fish spirits, asking for blessings on their tribe. They also pray to the gods for good fortune and courage on the dangerous seas.

Although local fishers can catch flying fish between March and June, they are restricted to capturing only those found in shallow waters. During this period, netting any deep-sea or coral reef fish is not permitted. If fishers fail to follow this rule, various species may not have enough time to recover their numbers, and harmony with nature will be lost.

At the end of June, the annual sea harvest concludes with another ceremony to express gratitude and respect for nature's endless cycles. After the ceremony, flying fish can no longer be caught. Therefore, from July onward, only dried and stored alibangbang can be eaten. Furthermore, after the Mid-Autumn Festival, even these dried fish must not be consumed. This custom seems to have been engraved in the locals' hearts and is believed to prevent ill luck and guarantee abundance in seasons to come.

Just as the locals are concluding their scaly harvest for the year, scores of tourists begin arriving on Lanyu for the summer season. New visitors may feel like fish out of water at first, but they can follow some basic guidelines to enjoy their stay while respecting local traditions. First, it is considered a taboo to touch or photograph the Tao fishing boats without permission, as doing so is believed to bring bad luck. Visitors should also avoid entering private gardens uninvited to view or sample drying fish. In addition, asking about future fishing trips is inappropriate, as locals believe that the gods may be angered and that the harvest may be spoiled as a consequence. Finally, to show respect for the community and environment, visitors should avoid snorkeling or diving in traditional fishing waters during the flying fish season. Such activities can disturb the local ecosystem.

To outsiders, the customs of the flying fish season may seem to be mysterious, but they are deeply rooted in long-held beliefs and respect for nature. The ancient wisdom of Lanyu's Tao inhabitants thus gives us much to learn about living in harmony with the planet. After all, we are all in the same boat under nature's wing.