

Japan Notes 2009

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From December 9th to 17th, I was in Japan at the invitation of the Institute for Global Change Adaption Science at Ibaraki University. On the 10th and 11th, I gave two intensive seminars on sustainable regional development (cf. <http://reimer.concordia.ca/Research>) and for the other days I was thrilled with visits to several places and events in the Japanese countryside.

I have provided a few notes about two of those days – when I was taken to some of our old NRE sites and re-introduced to many of our friends from that region.

Dec 12, 2009 – Awano (now part of Kanuma City)

After 10 years I am back enjoying the wonderful hospitality in Awano, so I felt it would be appropriate to bring you up to date on conditions here since the heady days of the NRE. Our friend Koji Kato drove me here and arranged for two days of meeting and touring in the area.

Awano Restaurant

It was fitting that our first meeting in Awano was at the “French” restaurant established and run by some of the local women. It is still thriving – the herb garden out the back has been expanded and the menu has been adapted to give it more of an Italian look than a French one. If you recall, the original objective for the restaurant was to give the women an outlet for experimenting with herbs, so French and Italian cooking were the options of choice.



The restaurant has managed to attract sufficient clientele from the area (and from far away Tokyo) to maintain the business and contribute visitors for other businesses and activities in the town. As you will see below, it also served as an inspiration for other women in a nearby town.

Joining us at the restaurant was Mr Haruo Kosugi the now-retired Vice-Mayor of the town. Some of you may remember Mr Kosugi as part of the delegation from Japan who visited us in 2002. He had many stories of Awano for us – starting with the amalgamation they recently underwent with Kanuma City, a much larger city nearby. The amalgamation was not welcomed by all of Awano (particularly the more remote part to the west), but the financial situation was such that they had little choice if they wished to maintain services. It also helped that the federal government had built a tunnel through the mountain that separated the two parts of Awano the last time we were here.

Under the rules of amalgamation, the city councillors are elected by popular vote. Mr Kosugi acknowledged that there is some danger in this since Awano may end up with no councillors, but he felt

that a ward system of election would encourage council votes to be solely based on ward issues and less open to consideration of the municipality in general. “Besides”, he added “under the current system, we may end up with more councillors from time to time.”

He described how Awano is still facing difficult times. The population continues to decline, the average age is rising, and they are challenged with learning how to work in the new amalgamation.

Koji then took us (his wife and 3-year old boy were along for the trip) to the Wada Yosui Park – a small park established by the municipality along a stream. This is a special place since it is here that the fireflies gather in the evening, turning it into a natural lightshow that is well known by people all over the region. The stream is in danger, however, since an imported weed has taken over the bank of the stream and threatens to slow down the flow which is so vital to the life cycle of the fireflies.

Wada Yousui Park



In response to this situation the municipality initiated a program of rural-urban collaboration with the help of funds from the Prefecture (the level of government that is somewhat equivalent to our province). Using a fund established for rural-urban interaction they invited volunteers from nearby cities to help them keep the riverbank clear. In return, they provide activities, education, and a rural experience for the volunteers and their children. The response from urban people was sufficient to support regular activities in the park, including the involvement of university students and faculty. If the volunteers wish to put in a little extra effort they are also invited to help with a garden across from the stream – thereby making them eligible for produce at harvest time.

After harvesting some vegetables for dinner, we headed off to visit another of our NRE exchange members: Mr Omori. Mr Omori is an impressive example of a leader and initiator in the community. On his small farm he grows hemp – a crop that is particularly well adapted to this region. His son was not interested in the farm – choosing to become an interior designer – until he discovered the artistic and practical benefits of hemp. He began by making paper with hemp in the traditional Japanese way and found that it could be used for very attractive wall paper, as well as the core of lamps, wall hangings, and pictures. Word of his talent spread so he and his father opened up a small gallery on their site, added tables and a coffee/tea service and welcomed the many guests who arrived with an interest in the art. Mr Omori’s wife meanwhile opened a small bakery on the premises and soon the family had a multi-focused destination for city people from all over the region. Their success has been achieved without extensive advertising – consisting primarily through a website and word-of-mouth.

Mr Omori contributes to the word-of mouth since he is frequently asked to give presentation on his business, the processes related to hemp production, and business development in general. So often is

he asked that he has had to cut back his appearances in order to have time for other things – like travelling to Chicago to visit his daughter.

Both Mr Kosugi and Mr Omori commented on the value of the NRE exchange trip – and they asked that I pass on their best wishes to you all.

Dec 13, 2009

The next day was just as full. This time Koji took me to Motegi town – a relatively vital community in the region. Our first stop was at Takehara, a small village nestled in some dramatic hills. Most of the flat land is the result of terracing – for homes, rice, community buildings, and parking lots. We pulled into such a lot beside a gently sloping hillside of carefully arranged high bush blueberries. Since we were there in December the bushes were rather sparse, but Koji informed me that they were quite successful in season and served as a ‘pick-your-own’ site for visitors from all over the region.

We walked down the steep slope of the road, past the small Buddhist shrine and associated buildings. They reminded me of the many small shrines that can be found in rural Quebec – old bathtubs used to house a statue of the Virgin Mary, small stone buildings with a cross inside, or larger crosses sometimes with a suffering Jesus included and sometimes without. The Japanese shrines (both Buddhist and Shinto) are clearly venues of contemplation, however, with only the occasional statue to the angry Buddha that is part of a particular sect’s tradition.

Down the hill we could see a much less tranquil site, however. A large crowd of people was busy beside a simple wood building that served as the community hall. Smoke was rising up from one side of the crowd while on the other side, men, women, and children were down on their knees working intensely. Running down the middle were a series of long tables lined by chairs. As we approached, I could see that those on their knees were on a large plastic tarp covered with people, rice fonds, tin cans, bits of wood, and woven grasses. They were busy assembling ornaments supported in the cans and covered by the leaves, fonds, and woven grasses. It was part of their annual celebration of the rice harvest.

Koji explained to me that this was a group of local residents along with people who had come from outside the region as part of a program for rural-urban partnership. The outsiders paid a membership fee to learn about rice growing, production, and related activities. In the spring they had joined the local people in preparing, flooding, and planting the rice; returned during the growing season to maintain the crop as it grew; then helped with the harvest in the fall. This was the final meeting of the group – a time when they were cooking the fruits of their labour and celebrating the friends they had found in the process.

Community Ornament



The rice they had planted and harvested was the variety used for the sticky rice that is enjoyed by many Japanese. Over by the fire the women were stirring a large iron caldron while the rice was cooking – giving turns to the older children and periodically checking the state of the kernels. My attention was drawn from the ornaments when I heard shouts from the men as they gathered around a large log – hollowed out into a deep bowl. The shouting was obviously about the state of the rice since one of the elder women had signalled that it was ready for the next step. She lifted out several large scoops of rice in a strainer, let the water run off and dumped the result into the bowl of the log.

Then it was the turn of the men. Using a large wooden mallet they began to pound the rice in the bowl – laughing as the mallet was passed around and encouraging each newcomer to lift the mallet higher or hit the rice harder. When my turn came I was surprised by the weight of the mallet – and only a few times missed the mass of rice in the bottom of the log.

Pounding Rice

After each hammer, one of the women would rearrange the rice with a large flat scoop and prepare it for the next hit. In no time at all, the individual grains of rice disappeared and became part of a large, gummy mass of rice in the bottom of the log. Anyone who could lift the mallet had a chance to help out in the process – with plenty of comments and encouragement around the circle. Koji later told me that there was quite a discussion when I was wielding the mallet – about whether my extra height would be an advantage or not.



After a few rounds of boiling and hammering, a large quantity of the sticky rice was amassed so we were all called to the table for the meal. Small parts of the mass were cut off and dipped with a wide variety of sauces and jams. Some were salty, some were sweet, some were tart, and some were smooth. All of them were passed around for tasting and with each one I was quizzed regarding my likes and dislikes.

A woman sitting opposite me was able to speak in rudimentary English so I took the occasion to ask her about her participation in this project. She said that she did it for her child – a young girl of about 11 years old giggling next to her. It turned out that her daughter was an inquisitive child so I was thoroughly entertained as she would ask her mother a question that created laughs around the table before I got an explanation from her mother. “Where is he from?” “Did he get here by car?” “Where is his family? “Is he Santa Claus?” “Does he like the rice?” were the types of questions she asked.

Near the end of the meal, I was invited to say a few words to the people gathered as is the custom among the Japanese. Words of appreciation and queries about my thoughts on their village, activities, and rural issues in general were exchanged until two of the local young people got out their instruments (a violin and cello) to provide some musical entertainment for the crowd. They played both western

classical music and Japanese ballads before the event came to an end and people started to gather up their creations.

Shitaki Farm

Koji and I climbed back up the hill with the laughter and shouts of the children behind us. We headed back on the winding mountain road, past the occasional farmhouse, paddy fields, and village to a small mountain settlement by paddy terraces and lovely stream. It was here, at Yamauchi Kabuto where a group of students from Utsunomiya University had prepared a field for cultivating a variety of vegetables and plants. As we walked among the terraces I noticed unusual patterns of logs neatly arranged beneath the trees along the side of the hills. Koji informed me that these were the arrangements for growing shitaki mushrooms. The oak logs were stacked and seeded with mushroom spores then harvested as the mushrooms grew. Nearby was a long shed in which they were dried for export. These log structures have a life cycle of about four years with many harvests of mushrooms gathered over that time.



After a short conversation with the farmer we drove back through the mountains to a small restaurant near the town of Ajasai. This restaurant specialized in traditional Japanese foods with a contemporary difference. Although the ingredients were traditional, the way in which they were prepared and served was not. For example, I was served a remarkable dish of carrot puree, spinach, and milk – all in a jellied mixture. It was sweet, surprising, and very tasty.

This was a restaurant created by a few local women inspired by the Awano success. They channelled their interest in experimenting with food to this venue with the help of local development funds.

Our final stop before returning to the university was at a huge composting centre near the village of Midorikan. One of the largest inputs to this centre is enormous quantities of leaves gathered by local people along the roadways. Evidence of the process was all around us as we drove to and from the centre: large beige sacks could be seen all along the roads. Local people were paid by the sack to fill them with leaves for transport to the composting centre. It helped to explain why the roads looked so clean even though they travelled through heavily wooded regions.

My other days in Japan were just as busy – with meeting students, visiting faculty, a visit to the municipal offices and co-op, and even some of the cultural sights of the region. They were all facilitated by the generous and stimulating company of my host, Professor Mitsuhro, his students, and our colleague, Dr. Kato. I was thrilled on the evening before I left to be joined at dinner with many of our friends from the NRE days.

As we have discovered in the past, our collaboration with Japanese colleagues have taken us far beyond the joys of learning new ideas and perspectives, to building warm and lasting friendships.



NRE Reunion