Towards 2020 World Natural Heritage status – My contact with nature in Tokunoshima  

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Have you heard of Tokunoshima? When I think of Tokunoshima, I think of my friend’s house that is there, of watching the Awa Odori and people coming together at New Year’s, and the scattering cherry blossoms in Oyasu Park. Tokunoshima, an isolated island in Kagoshima Prefecture, has a name similar to that of a nostalgic place, although I had never been there before to see for myself. I am very thankful to my superior who sent me on to Okinoerabujima again to collect data, and I decided to finish my conquest of Kagoshima Prefecture’s remote islands with Tokunoshima. In this column, I would like to detail my experiences in this secret paradise, so please stay with me until the end.

I loved the view from the plane window, and my gaze was fixated outward for the duration of the one hour flight. The green mountains were reflected in the blue sea as I drew steadily closer to the island. Just as I was worrying if we were about to crash into the turquoise-green shoals, we landed, seemingly skimming the surface of the water. When I looked at the map later I understood – Tokunoshima’s airport runway was built on top of a reef.

At the airport, Director Kubo from the Tokunoshima office graciously received me, and we first headed to Unbuki Cave. A sunken limestone cavern known as the “Sea in the Middle of the Land”, Unbuki Cave was recently confirmed as the largest underwater limestone cave in Japan. Moreover, earthenware had also been discovered, in addition to the flora and fauna found there.

As preparations proceed for the public opening slated for the summer of 2020, it seems like the number of tourists who come to cave dive will increase. Even if diving is prohibited for now, the view of stalactites reflected through the clear water and banyan roots creeping along the strange rocks is worth the trip. For a bird-lover like myself, the highlight was my encounter with the designated natural monument of Japan, a Japanese robin (akahige),
known for its unique red-coloured head. Director Kubo said laughingly that it was because I was a good person.

On the first day, we travelled around the northern shore, and on the second day, Deputy Director Matsunaga kindly showed me around the southern part of the island. As a result, I was able to see the diverse geological features of Tokunoshima. The beautiful sandy beaches such as Yonama Beach and Aze Prince Beach aside, there were also Inutabu Coast’s mélange deposits, the coastline of Mushiroze – formed by huge granite boulders carried and tumbled into place by the waves – as well as Innojoufuta’s cliffs and strange rock formations caused by limestone erosion. Leaving my camera with the staff from the Tokunoshima office, I clambered up slippery granite and abrasively sharp limestone alike, as though I was on a holiday with family. It was an enjoyable time.

As expected of an island aiming for World Natural Heritage status in 2020, Tokunoshima is also a treasure trove of wildlife. Near the Amami rabbit observation hut, we could imagine their nocturnal lives by observing their grass tunnels and excrement. We also spotted a large group of hermit crabs of different sizes and shell colours scuttling in the shade of the rocks.

It is said that verdant nature remains preserved in Tokunoshima thanks to the Habu viper. In Amagi Town Hall, there is a Habu Gallery. It is a small room with a shutter that, when opened, will bring you face to face with the feared guardian of nature. That would already be enough, but I had the good fortune of a second encounter, when I saw island dwellers who had captured 16 habu vipers of an assortment of sizes and were turning their custody over to the depository. Seeing pictures of the bite aftereffects left me nauseous, and it made my skin crawl to see freezer stuffed with their carcasses, awaiting retrieval by the leather workers or their conversion into habu liqueur. Residents who capture a habu, which has an attack radius of 1.5 metres, are rewarded with ¥3000, while the depository workers get ¥400 yen a day and handle more than 6000 snakes a year. I felt that life was not easy for either of those parties.

The animal that is most closely involved with life at Tokunoshima is the cow. Since the Edo period, the only form of entertainment for the island dwellers was bullfighting. A few days ago, the National Bullfighting Summit was held at a small bullfighting ring, where a 1000-strong crowd from both within and outside the island gathered. I went to visit Tokunoshima Nakusamikan, a bullfighting ring and museum, and happened to chance upon a bullfighter warming up their bull. The owner was a girl who looked not even 20 years old, and took great care of her bull as a parent would a child. In a time when unique regional culture is disintegrating in the face of an ageing population and cultural homogenisation, I was relieved to see that Tokunoshima’s bullfighting culture continues to live on in its next generation.
The trip was planned for three days and two nights but, as others had predicted, the weather turned inclement and the cancellation of the flight that I dreaded to miss became a reality. Even so, I rushed to the airport with hope in my heart, and Director Kubo helped me to obtain the waiting number for empty seats on that day, as well as the flight ticket. But when I saw my waiting number, I realised that it was impossible for my turn to come. Director Kubo, who was by my side and encouraging me, understood this as well. I held back my tears as I decided to use this precious chance to continue my tour of the island. Thanks to the extended stay, I spent a cloudy day that threatened to pour learning about how they treated the water to mitigate agricultural salt damage, and that Tokunoshima people handled the frequent typhoons well.

Because the next day was a weekend, I did not want to inconvenience the Tokunoshima office, and asked an acquaintance to take me to the airport. What I did not expect was that Deputy Director Matsunaga had rushed to the airport as well, worried about me. Moreover, both of them had given me presents. When I finally returned to mainland Kagoshima in the afternoon, my supervisor was waiting at the airport to receive me.

On this trip, I was touched not only by the merits of Tokunoshima, but also by the emotional warmth of Kagoshima people. The people who took time out of their busy schedules to show me around the island (a destination I decided at the eleventh hour), the pleasant people at the Tokushima office who shared a dinner party with me, the person at the Sango Center souvenir shop near the Sotetsu Tunnel who gave me delicious soybeans even though I did not buy anything, the person from Smile – which sells Tokunoshima-produced coffee – who let me hear interesting stories, the conversation partners during my waiting time at the airport with numbers 5, 6, and 10. Whether because I was a good person, or because I was surrounded by nothing but good people, I had nothing but good memories of my time at Tokunoshima, happenings included.

This will be my last column. How did you find it? Kagoshima is rich in nature, history, and culture, and amongst them I have discovered a fascination with Kagoshima’s remote islands. My term as Coordinator of International Relations at Kagoshima Prefecture has ended, but I will continue to laud Kagoshima. I will return some day, and at that time it would be wonderful if I was warmly welcomed back again.

For these four years, I have been in your care!
Visit to Government of the State of Georgia, United States

On 2nd August (local time), Governor Mitazono paid a visit to the State of Georgia in the United States, which signed a sister city alliance with Kagoshima Prefecture. He met with the Lieutenant Governor Geoff Duncan.

The two provinces signed a sister city alliance in 1966 due to the commonalities in climate and history, and Kagoshima University and the University of Georgia conduct academic exchanges even today.

Governor Mitazono expressed that “the Governor and Lieutenant Governor should come to Kagoshima and try Japan’s best wagyu and enjoy the hot springs”, while Lieutenant Governor Duncan said that “both prefecture and state share a warm heart, and I would like to visit Kagoshima”.

After which, confirmation documents regarding the sister city alliance and strengthening friendly relations were exchanged.

Governor Brian Kemp announced that the day of the visit (2nd August) was approximately the 53rd anniversary of the sister city alliance. Secretary of State Raffensperger also recognised Governor Mitazono as an honorary citizen of the State of Georgia.

Hereon, we can look forward to the advancements in exchange between our prefecture and the State of Georgia, as well as the United States.
The Southern California Prefectural Association’s 120th Year Founding Celebration was held in Southern California, Montebello City on the 4th of August (local time), and the governor attended as a guest.

270 people attended the celebration. From Japan, these included the prefectural assembly chairman and employees, prefectural chamber of commerce, and those from Kagoshima prefectural associations in the Kantō region. From the United States, attendees included members of the prefectural association and other Kagoshima prefectural associations within the United States, the consulate-general in Los Angeles, the Japanese Chamber of Commerce of Southern California, and other prefectural associations from within Southern California. For entertainment, there was a performance of Japanese dance (buyō). The guests danced to a Kagoshima folk ballad (Kagoshima Oharabushi), and the mood was lively.

Governor Mitazono expressed his respect for the hard work that everyone at the prefectural association had done, and also his gratitude for the important role that the prefectural association played in interacting with the homeland Kagoshima, including the friendship activities between members and other prefectural associations, as well as the fostering of the younger ones. He also commended both the elderly and the working population.

On the occasion of the Southern California Prefectural Association’s 120th Anniversary, let us wish for their continued growth.
On 4th August (local time), Governor Mitazono promoted famous Kagoshima produce at the Kagoshima fair held by Nijiya Market in the suburbs of Los Angeles.

Nijiya Market revolves around selling Japanese foodstuffs, and is a Japanese supermarket in the United States with 12 operating stores.

Along with the businesses from the prefecture who participated in the Kagoshima fair, Governor Mitazono called out to customers and lauded the merits of the prefecture's produce.

The Governor also met with President Blanckensee. In addition to offering his greetings at the opening of the fair, he also requested that Kagoshima Prefecture’s agricultural and fishery produce, processed goods, and shōchū – which are safe and of a high quality – to be carried in greater quantities.

Let us continue to promote Kagoshima’s charms hereafter!
Introduction of Kagoshima Specialty Products

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A Note from the Editors (Kagoshima Prefecture International Affairs Division)

What did you think of this month’s “Kagoshima Southern Wind Tidings”?
The editors will continue to strive to make this prefectural multilingual newsletter a source of information and a bridge to connect all of you to Kagoshima. We would like to ask our readers to provide their opinions, suggestions, article contributions and Kagoshima-related news.

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