



四街道市国際交流協会広報誌(ヨッカニュース)

YOCCA NEWS

Yotsukaido Cross-Cultural Association News

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***** 2012年度事業ハイライト *****



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Think You Know Yotsukaido?

四街道を知り尽くそう！～『四街道知ってるか！？』

One of my favorite spots to visit at night in Yotsukaido is Mukuroji no Sato — a small wildlife sanctuary / farm right next to the Sobu Line train tracks, half way between Yotsukaido and Monoi Stations. In the spring I go to hear frog songs, watch fireflies on summer evenings, and in the fall I go to enjoy crickets and other night insects. Deciding that its natural history



was just as much a part of Yotsukaido as its human history, I thought it would be nice to visit Mukuroji no Sato with YOCCA.

You Break it, You Buy It

We arrived on a cold sunny day in February, and Mr. Yamasaki, a gentle-mannered fellow in work clothes and rubber boots met us to give us a tour and answer our questions. He told us right away that he was not “the spokesman” for Mukuroji — nobody had an assigned role, or reported to any superiors. But he agreed to be our guide for the day.

As he showed us around, he immediately destroyed any ideas I had that Mukuroji was a place to leave nature alone and let it express itself undisturbed. “If we just left the fields alone, they would soon be taken over by just a few species of brush and animals.” This reminded me of clear-cut logging in my home state of Washington — after you cut the trees in a forest, the forest just doesn’t “grow back.” In the best of cases, the forest has to go through a series of stages that takes over a hundred years. In the worst of cases, thick brush grows up, choking out any other trees. With Mukuroji as well, it took constant work to cut weeds, keep water channels clean, and many other tasks. A rule for humans everywhere hoping to co-exist with nature: you break it, you buy it. Once you disrupt the delicate balance of a natural system, you have to take care of it.

About a dozen other gentlemen were also there, and soon had gathered around us to talk about Mukuroji,



and what they were doing to help. One man, Mr. Toumi, was surveying the frog population. “I love frogs!” I told him. He gave me half-smile and said “not so fond of them myself.” He pointed to a cluster of frog eggs in the water. One female frog, he told us, lays exactly one cluster of eggs a year, and the number of eggs she lays reflects how well-fed and healthy she was. He got the help of a bunch of elementary school kids from Kuriyama Elementary School, and together they counted the number of eggs in one cluster. It was over two thousand. “It was fun at first but we sure got tired of counting!” Another gentleman, Mr. Saito, was surveying birds. “In a year I see forty to fifty different varieties of birds. Today I didn’t see so many — maybe eleven varieties.” Mr. Yamasaki explained “We’re part of a network of 108 sites across Japan, working together to observe the state of wildlife over the entire country.

Connections

The theme of connections came up over and over again while we were talking. I was surprised to learn that the frogs and fireflies living in Mukuroji were completely unintentional. The first goal of the volunteers was to make an environment friendly to medaka, a small guppy-like fish that grows in ponds across Japan. Like fireflies, they faced decimation due to the overuse of pesticides, but are gradually starting to make a comeback. Mukuroji has been a member of the “Medaka no Kai” (the Medaka Society), a non-political organization dedicated to restoring and preserving medaka, since 2004. It just so happened, that an environment good for medaka was also conducive to fireflies and frogs, which migrated from neighboring marshy areas. “The fireflies came in from over there” he said, pointing to the north end of the valley. Also, to the south was a marshy river valley that made a network of land stretching across Yotsukaido, Sakura, Chiba, from as far as Toke to Inzai. Living things can thrive in Mukuroji only because it is connected to all the areas around it.

Another unexpected connection: “That river on the other side of the train tracks is the Onagi River. Its source is up in Utsukushigaoka. So anyone living in that area shouldn’t wash their cars in front of their houses. All that soap, dirt, and oily water comes washing up here.” Mukuroji even holds ties to Mount Fuji. Pointing out an oily sheen on the surface of the rice field water, Mr. Yamasaki asked “What do you think that is?” “Oil?” I

replied. “Nope. Look.” He reached down and took some on his finger to show me. “It’s a very thin crust, not oil. It’s iron percolating up from the soil, and oxidizing on the surface.” Chiba’s rich soil is partly due to Mount Fuji. Every time it erupts, winds usually carry the ash to the east, meaning Chiba and Ibaraki.

Some connections were less-desired. The subject of 外来種 (gairaishu — alien species) came up. One less-than-welcome resident of Mukuroji was American crayfish. “They eat everything they find. But kids love catching them.” “You should just eat them,” I teased, knowing Japanese people don’t usually think of crayfish as food. “Oh, we have! They weren’t bad!” I also discovered that bullfrogs were introduced from North America as well, and luckily haven’t yet appeared in Mukuroji. Like crayfish they eat everything they can find. Another time, Mr. Yamasaki reached in to a rice paddy and pulled out a small black snail that had left a track in the silt. “This is a left-spiraled snail. That means it’s a foreign species. Native snails are right-spiraled.” This seemed to amuse everyone around me — in Japanese 左巻き (“left-spiraled”) also means “not quite right in the head.” To the volunteers at Mukuroji: It’s true that I’m an alien species, left-spiraled, and will eat anything, but I’ll do my best not to be invasive.

Building a Community

Towards the afternoon, Mr. Kusuoka, who owns the actual land of Mukuroji, came to meet us. Spry and



energetic for a man in his eighties, he talked about Mukuroji from his perspective. “Some members of the Lions Club wanted a place to grow dragonflies, so I let them dig several ponds. Eventually, a previous mayor of Yotsukaido approached me looking for a place to start a colony of medaka. That’s how Mukuroji no Sato got its start. It’s not enough to just own the land, or it gets taken over by weeds. You have to let people use it. You have to let children come here to play. You have to let groups like Mukuroji come here, and take care of it, and turn it into some place the whole community can enjoy.” Mr. Kusuoka pointed out another connection that Mukuroji has with the community and even the world.

“Last year, kids from Kuriyama Elementary grew mochi rice here. With part of the rice they made mochi, and sold the rest. With the proceeds, they helped fund a UNESCO project to build a school in Cambodia.”

Don’t it always seem to go...

Mr. Yamasaki and Mr. Kusuoka both made a comment about medaka and fireflies. “When I was a kid, I didn’t think anything special about medaka or fireflies — they were just there, and there were so many fireflies that they were almost a nuisance. We would collect them by the jarful. We never considered anyone actually trying to nurture medaka, or people actually coming just to see fireflies.” Joni Mitchell’s lyrics from the song Big Yellow Taxi came to mind: “Don’t it always seem to go, that you don’t know what you’ve got until it’s gone...”

Mukuroji is on the very edge of an ecological system, but it also faces the vast sea of the Tokyo metropolitan area, a sea which is rising year by year. A presence that never escaped our eyes was the earth movers filling in the north part of the valley with black waste dirt. It was the same area that Mukuroji’s fireflies originally came from. “They’re filling in part of the valley for new developments.” Also, Mukuroji is a marshland in a valley; its water supply comes from rain trickling down the surrounding hills. With the valley shrinking, the supply of water will shrink too. Whatever chemical footprint that waste dirt contains will also leave its mark on Mukuroji.

With the evening approaching we said goodbye to Mr. Yamasaki and Mr. Kusuoka. I left feeling how fragile this little area is, and how much it depends on people like Mr. Kusuoka, willing to give a bit for the betterment of his town, and Mr. Yamasaki and the other volunteers, spending their time every week to make Mukuroji no Sato a healthy thriving part of Yotsukaido.

by Devon McNare, photos : Akiko Shiraishi



(Mr. Yamasaki, Devon McNare, Mr. Kusuoka)