

Coastal life shows what society has lost

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In this area of the Pacific, there are a large number of islands. Some of them were connected in ancient times and known as Sundaland. Despite the omnipotent Internet, I could not get much information about them. The aim of my travel was to trace the route by which mankind came to Japan.

I started my kayak journey from northern Australia with a Japanese buddy in 2002. Every year, I visited Asian countries. I paddled to Indonesia's Papua Province (formerly known as Irian Jaya) with an Indonesian friend. In 2007, I successfully completed one of the toughest routes in the world—the Bashi Channel between the northern Philippines and southern Taiwan. Nobody had traveled by kayak along the channel before. The waves and the current are difficult to negotiate because they are affected by the Kuroshio current and conditions in the South China Sea and Pacific Ocean. While paddling along the 100-kilometer channel, I wasn't able to sleep a wink for more than 24 hours. If I had taken a rest, my kayak could have drifted off course. No ship was supporting me. After completing this challenge by myself, I believed I would be able to go everywhere by sea kayak. I still had about 2,000 kilometers to go.

In fishing villages in Japan and other Asian countries, fishermen gave other people free fish. They could have made money if they had sold the fish instead. When I saw fishermen do this on Hachijojima for the first time,

I could not understand why. However, in my journey through Asia, the answer was obvious. These people know they cannot survive if they do not help each other. They know how dangerous the sea is.

In 2005, Yukie—my then fiancée, now my wife—and I created a shop for outdoor activities on Ishigakijima island in Okinawa Prefecture. We organized small-group sea kayaking and skin diving tours. We were poor, but happy.

I want to find how to coordinate civilization and nature in better ways.

Now I have a 4-year-old son. Though I was once enthusiastic about improving my own ability, I have come to think more about the importance of creating a better society for younger generations since my son's birth. In 2011, I joined a project named "Umihenro" (sea pilgrimage), led by then Kochi University Prof. Kosaku Yamaoka, to develop a better understanding of people's lives along the seacoast and consider what present-day society has lost as we seek a more convenient life.

Through the Umihenro trips around Shikoku, I became more interested in building a good relationship between nature and people. I believe such a relationship is needed more in urban areas than in remote areas. I also realized the great diversity of Japan's nature. For these reasons, we moved in January from Okinawa Prefecture to Zushi, Kanagawa Prefecture, my wife's hometown. Now we come and go between Zushi and Okinawa Prefecture for my work.

For the latest phase of the Umi-

henro, we conducted a 16-day kayak trip along the Sanriku coast in Miyagi Prefecture in May. We visited 12 small fishing villages that were affected by the March 11, 2011, Great East Japan Earthquake. Local fishermen weren't wary of us because we approached their villages from the sea by kayaks. After they realized how serious we were toward the sea, we quickly became good friends. In one village, we helped gather oysters from floating rafts. In another, we enjoyed fresh sea squirts the fishermen gave us. They were kind to others even though they were affected by the disaster. One fisherman told us they used to conduct evacuation drills even before the earthquake. Many fishermen survived the tsunami even though their houses were swept away. Some fishermen told us the sea had been cleaned up since the tsunami and that marine species had been increasing.

Since the earthquake, the Tohoku people's mutual aid has been called "kizuna" (bond). But I think their relationship is not expressed by this word. They are placed in an environment that encourages them to cooperate and communicate with each other to survive.

I'm 39. In the fishing villages overseas, people in their 40s and 50s had already reached a certain stage of their lives. They convey their knowledge to young people. It's my turn now.

I want to recommend urban residents in particular to get more real experience in



Courtesy of Yosuke Kashiwakura

Satoru Yahata kayaks off Iriomotejima island, Okinawa Prefecture, in January 2011.

nature to prepare for possible disasters in the future. I'm developing my ideas to provide real experiences in nature for children and to help develop professionals who are able to rescue others during calamities. I want to kick off these projects in Kanagawa.

While working as a guide, I met many "Okinawa lovers" from Tokyo. They visited Okinawa because they did not like the environment there. It is sad. If you love your nearby nature, you can understand it in other areas well. This year I went kayaking with my friends in Tokyo. We saw Tokyo Skytree from our kayaks and went to the Odaiba district. We also enjoyed seeing full-bloom cherry blossoms while kayaking in Megurogawa river. When we know more about the greatness of Tokyo's waterfront, we can make a proper decision on how to preserve the environment around us. Now I want to find how to coordinate civilization and nature in better ways.

Interviewer: Fumiko Endo, The Japan News staff writer

Interviewee's profile

Satoru Yahata is a marine adventurer and an organizer of Okinawa-based outdoor tour shops "Churanesia." Yahata was born in Tokyo in 1974. He graduated from Senshu University. He was the world's first to kayak solo, and without the use of an engine across some channels, including the Bashi Channel between the Philippines and Taiwan in 2007 and the route between Yonagunijima in Okinawa and Taiwan in 2006.



Eishi Miyasaka/The Yomiuri Shimibun

Satoru Yahata talks in front of his sea kayak in the garden of his house in Zushi, Kanagawa Prefecture.