

## Connecting to Nature for Resilient Urban Society

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Looking back in time, only 10,000 years ago when the sea level was 120 meters lower than it is today, most of Asia was connected as one huge land mass. Terrestrial life could travel across the land that the sea has since set apart, and that we the people have come to divide it up into countries of nation states. Some remains to tell the tale of that grand adventure.

As such, upon arriving at the International House of Japan in Tokyo on the second week of September 2015, I was greeted by the delicate mauve-pink blossom of crape myrtle (*Lagerstroemia indica*). This is the same flower that greets me in India by the name *saoni* in Hindi and *pavalakkurinji* in Tamil; in China as *zi wei*; in Thailand as *yi keng*, in Indonesia as *bungur sakura*; in Malaysia as *bungur kecil*; and here in Japan as *sarusuberi*. It is a familiar face that reminds me of home.

This land and sea that we share have bound us together in wars and peace. We fight over the control of their resources; we negotiate for an access; we seek cooperation to reach a goal we cannot reach on our own. The land has been nourished by the decayed bodies of our ancestors, recycled into the food we eat, allowing us to become part of the whole. This is our common resource and today we are facing environmental challenge to protect our Common Goods.

At the macro level, the global environmental crisis faces the daunting challenge of political and economic power play among the Nation States and powerful business fraction. To an individual citizen it can feel hopeless at times, but big politics and super powers do find a match in shifting public paradigm. Every one of us can be an active player in this field.

At the Innovative City Forum 2015, which I attended during the ALFP individual activities period at Roppongi Academyhills, Ito Joichi, the director of MIT Media Lab, presented an unpublished model he was working on, showing the cycle of mutual influence between our perception of nature and our culture. Our knowledge of nature influences our technology, and our use of technology influences our behavior, which in turn becomes our culture, and so the cycle wheels on. It is a useful model to contemplate, because, as I see it, it is not a simple direct cause-effect inasmuch as it is not just about *what* we know, but *how* we know it, and who gets to know how much. In the age of complex, high technology, with so much knowledge in the invisible realm of nature being pooled into utility, most of us are left behind. We become mere consumers of technology and get cut off from the process of production. There are currently attempts to make the information accessible and readily visible, but there are so much and they are overwhelming. We end up being disconnected from nature, and so is our culture.

My special focus is on urban resilience, as the majority of world population now lives in cities. They can either become problems or solutions to sustainable management of natural resources. It depends on our design and adaptive behavior. It is my view that we need to get reconnected with nature in its multidimensional facets and as a whole to find a compass towards sustainability. We need to integrate indigenous nature into our cities, not just for effective adaptation and designs of our habitat, as well as the ecosystem services it provides, but also as a source of knowledge and seed bank for creative and green economy. I am therefore interested in how people are related to nature and curious about how each one of us can find way to get better connected.

During the ALFP program in Japan, I had the privilege to discuss and learn from a number of very knowledgeable resource persons both formerly and more casually, including among the distinguished fellows. In our seminars and visits, we had an insight into some aspects of Japanese relationship with nature—through food culture (Elizabeth Andoh's seminar on *washoku* or authentic Japanese cuisine), the world of garden (Uchiyama Sadafumi's seminar on the Japanese garden and aesthetics), and the way of Satoyama (e.g. visit to Totoro Forest Fund). In addition, I have talked to biodiversity conservationists and nature reserve manager, namely Chan Simba of Birdlife International and Sagawa Kazuo of Tokyo Port Wild Bird Park, and spent a good part of my spare time observing nature management and people behavior in nature reserves within and near Tokyo.

Despite all these helps and opportunities, I still have yet to come to grasp with a fair understanding of Japanese perception of nature. There are dichotomies in so many angels one cares to look at. An attempt to put the pieces together only leaves me perplexed, and I realize that I would need to know the language and be immersed in the culture for a much longer period to be able to begin to understand. This essay should then be treated as an attempt to reflect and digest on what I have learned so far.

It seems that the Japanese acute sense of aesthetic is so embedded in the culture and evidently plays an important role in nature management. There is a deep appreciation and respect for nature in its imperfect state, yet at times it rejects nature chaos. The strong linkage to space and time, the relationship with seasonal and hourly changes, engages mindfulness of the moment in a way that is wanted even in many other Buddhist cultures. The gratefulness for nature bounty is apparent, yet there is a seeming carelessness of resource consumption that can be difficult for an outside observer to understand, like the general use of disposable chopsticks and wide consumption of endangered species such as the Bluefin Tuna and Blue Whale. Satoyama perception and biodiversity conservation are often kindred spirits that initiate nature protection, but the more human-centric view of Satoyama and biodiversity conservation has their differences at times—as they do elsewhere in Asia, and perhaps the rest of the world. Indiscriminate hunting of dolphins and bears, however, is another matter.

Regardless of what I do not understand of the Japanese culture, there is much more that I respect and appreciate, and can only wish my own Thai culture could share some of these attributes. Our severely unequal society does not care enough to protect the Commons. We have a long way to go in shaping the mainstream paradigm towards sustainable development. The good news is, there are many individuals working towards that goal. It is when I focus on these remarkable individuals, both at home and here through this program, I feel connected, despite our very different cultures. It will be through the exchanges of individuals with shared values across Asia that we can go forward. Some are woven in organic communities such as Kamiyama and Share Okusawa that we visited.

On the issue of nature connection and biodiversity conservation, there seems to be a common challenge in diminishing public interest and awareness, particularly among the young generation. Here in Tokyo, it reflects in surveys carried out by Japan for Sustainability (JFS),<sup>1</sup> who also monitors a decrease in media coverage. It is what I personally observed at all nature reserves, that most visitors are retired elders and middle ages; there were few, if any at all, young people spending time in the reserves. Conservationists I talked to agreed with this observation. They feel that the biggest challenge at hand is to renew and maintain interest in nature and biodiversity with the new generation.

The lack of interest in the agenda should not be surprising as there is often a similar pattern in many parts of Asia and elsewhere. To the media, they are old stories, no longer newsworthy. To activists in conservation, it is an on-going issue with old problems that have not been solved in many Asian cities, while there are new problems to be tackled.

We need to bring an interest in ecology and biodiversity back into public discourse. We need to make it appealing to the young generation. Nature is not a fashion trend; it should not be “out” in particular at the time we need to revive its integrity the most.

A quest for Tokyo identity at the Innovative City Forum 2015 looked for new architectural designs to brand the city, and more cultural events and venues to boost on par with London. These are important, but Tokyo nature reserves are also unique and deserve attention. As a first time visitor to Tokyo, I was in awe of the quality of accessible urban nature reserves here. These are not mere parks and gardens, but healthy vibrant ecosystems with rich biodiversity.

How many megacities can boast of a reserve with detailed data and history like Tokyo Port Wild Bird Park at Ota-ku or the Institute of Nature Study at Meguro, not to mention the magnificent Meiji Jingu forest right in the city center, in far better state than cedar-cypress forest planted all over the countryside and posing so much ecological and health problems. London and New York City may have some, but with a risk of getting mugged.

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<sup>1</sup> Junko Edahiro, “Perception, Awareness, Efforts over Biodiversity Shrinking,” Japan for Sustainability, (November 21, 2014), <[http://www.japanfs.org/en/news/archives/news\\_id035097.html](http://www.japanfs.org/en/news/archives/news_id035097.html)>.

How many people know that Shinkansen (Japanese bullet train) was designed by a bird-watching engineer, Nakatsu Eiji, who got inspired by three species of birds to make this train the best in the world of its time.<sup>2</sup> Without the birds teaching him, the Shinkansen we know today would not have come into existence. Likewise, the new generation must continue to learn from nature to find solutions that the 21st century demands.

Throughout the ALFP program, I was struck by the Japanese gift of storytelling. It is an ability that seems to have helped Japan to reinvent itself time and time again. We saw this with many businesses we visited. We saw it in the way cultural practice is contemplated. This is an ability we need to recommunicate with urban nature. It can be used to inspire visitors from other countries, whose interest can in turn be stimulating to Tokyo.

Tokyo 2020 goal will be enhanced with an initiative to provide information in English in Tokyo nature reserves. An international exchange program for youth in various fields to get connected with nature will further help to overcome our common challenge in revitalizing their interest, taking it into the future. The young people from different Asian countries have much to learn from one another. They are of the emerging trend, and so they instinctively know how to make it appealing to their own generation.

Other Asian cultures have much to offer in exchange. We can all learn from South Asians, especially their extraordinary ability to coexist with wildlife. The Thais are playful, and currently teemed with activist spirit (thanks to the military junta devastating development policy). If we make nature our compass, I believe we will find the common we seek.

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<sup>2</sup>“Shinkansen Train,” AskNature, < <http://www.asknature.org/product/6273d963ef015b98f641fc2b67992a5e>>.