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Peter Davis – University of New Castle, School of Arts and Cultures

ECOMUSEUMS IN JAPAN

This session is devoted to Ecomuseums in Europe and I was asked originally to speak about ecomuseum developments in the UK. However, as none exist there (in name at any rate) I decided that I would talk about my experiences of ecomuseums in another part of the world, namely Japan. I was fortunate to be invited to that country in May 2003 to work with Dr. Kazuoki Ohara of the University of Yokohama, who acts as Secretary of the Japanese Ecomuseological Society. With his help and guidance I was able to experience several ecomuseum sites and meet many of the people involved in running them. Although Japan is a long way from Europe, it is possible to learn from the progress that has been made in that country in implementing ecomuseological ideas in rural and urban settings.

We have a variety of preconceived ideas about Japan, ones that we absorb from film and television images. We perceive it as a highly technological country, of industry, of miniaturisation, a place of sprawling cities served by high-speed trains. Yet there has been a growing, gentle backlash to modernism in Japan, with an emerging realisation of the cultures and landscapes that are being lost as industry and urbanisation take their toll. The ecomuseum is being adopted in Japan as a mechanism of preserving ways of life, and natural and cultural landscapes.

In the limited time I have available I’m going to try and discuss four main points. I’ll tell you a little about the Japanese ecomuseum society, and then describe three different ecomuseums, all of which work in different ways. They are called Hirano Cho (near Osaka), Asahimachi (in the mountains of Yamagata) and the “Miura peninsula” (to the west of Tokyo).

The Japanese Ecomuseological Society was founded in 1995 and there are now ten sites in Japan that call themselves ecomuseums. However there are many more community-based initiatives, which are very like ecomuseums. The current ecomuseums map of Japan shows that these are located primarily on the main island of Honshu. They are very different kinds of museum, some are related to the natural environment, for example there is a museum that helps to preserve the stork; but others relate to using the land for gardening, others are old industrial sites. This variety of specialist subject areas is reflected in the three sites that I visited, which are described below.

Hirano Cho is about twenty miles from the great urban conurbation of Osaka. The town has been there for some 1,300 years and much of the street plan is exactly the same as it was well over 1000 years ago. An ecomuseum was founded there in 1993 as a loose network of activists, all of whom had helped to preserve part of the fabric of the town. There is no obvious management structure for this ecomuseum, but the priest from the local Buddhist temple coordinates the activities. One of the things he said to me was that “most Japanese museums are very boring and don’t touch local people”, an indication that most traditional museums in Japan, seem to be very distant from the people that they serve. Hirano Cho offers the visitor an extraordinary combination of sites including Buddhist temples, ancient trees, and historical houses. The ecomuseum also includes the present-day, so even the local bicycle shop – which is included in the Guinness book of records for producing the biggest bicycle in the world – is featured. It is also very clear that intangible heritage is very significant in Hirano too, especially celebrations, festivals and story telling.

I'd like to introduce this ecomuseum by showing you some pictures of it. My first meeting in Japan was with the local Buddhist priest and the head of the ecomuseum. The meeting took place in this temple, which is over a thousand years old; in the grounds of the temple the priest has developed a number of different museums. "The smallest museum in the world" is in effect a recording, a CD, playing songs and music from the local area, and recording of street-sounds and festivals. A sweet shop was dismantled from its original location and re-erected here too. From the temple you are invited to explore the rest of Hirano Cho, and visit the numerous sites scattered around the village. So temples on the street corners have been preserved as part of the historic landscape of the village, old wooden houses with small Japanese gardens, all form part of the ecomuseum. At one of the temples the local poet-priest recites his work, and the priest I mentioned earlier also tells stories to local children, called "kamishibai", is an ancient way of telling stories using illustrated storyboards. In the typical shopping streets, many of the shops are regarded as an important part of the ecomuseum, featuring old equipment for manufacturing their products.

This is a fascinating and very introspective ecomuseum. It has not been formed to attract tourists, but is entirely for the benefit of the people in Hirano Cho. Local people run it, and they have decided what fragments of their heritage are important to them. It is a split site, it encourages conservation, and it includes tangible and intangible heritage. There are both historic and contemporary values, it takes a holistic view of the locality and reflects local identity and pride in place. If I were looking for a site anywhere in the world that follows ecomuseum principles and practice, Hirano Cho would be high on the list. It is very inclusive and, I believe, very democratic.

Asahimachi was the first ecomuseum in Japan. The idea was explored from 1989, and it was inaugurated in 1991 by the local council. It works on a cooperative agreement between the council and the town's ecomuseum association, which is a group of local activists. Asahimachi is in the mountainous prefecture of Yamagata, a very beautiful rural area of the country, with spectacular landscapes of cherry orchards, terraced rice paddies and dense woodlands. It is a direct contrast to Hirano Cho, a substantial geographical area with a number of different sites that have been identified as part of the ecomuseum complex. Let me illustrate the diversity of these sites by showing you some images. The sites include this spiritual and natural site, a mix of woodlands, lakes and shrines, which is famous for its "moving" islands, mats of floating vegetation which are pushed by the wind, a really beautiful place. Asahimachi is in a very mountainous landscape, with very beautiful river valleys, so the wild life and the natural landscape is important here. Not surprisingly, one of the most beautiful flowers found in the area - and one which is typical of it - a lily - is used as the ecomuseum emblem. It's also a very rich agricultural area and they grow cherries, apples, and produce charcoal. There is an apple museum which is an important element of the ecomuseum, where different varieties of apples and their products - such as cider, spirits and jams - are exhibited and can be bought. The local winery is also part of the ecomuseum, One of the key landscape features in Asahi is the rice terraces, which are incredibly spectacular, a landscape that has been developed over hundreds and hundreds of years. One special place in Asahi ecomuseum is the Air Shrine, a place for contemplation on the top of a mountain in the middle of woodland. It is a sculpture made of polished stainless steel in which you can see reflections of the sky and the trees. Asahimachi ecomuseum also includes a Candle Maker's Workshop. All events and activities are co-ordinated by the central museum service, which has a small display and research area within the council offices.

Asahi is a really interesting place, but you can see that it is very different from Hirano Cho, in that it is promoted and managed by the local authority. Major local businesses are involved and there is a real drive to cultural tourism, so it's very outward looking, whereas Hirano Cho was inward looking, very introspective.

The final site I would like to describe is **Miura**. This map indicates its position relative to Tokyo. The Miura peninsula is an ecomuseum in the making, and one that I found really interesting, because the local city museum in Yokosuka is closely involved - it is very unusual to find a major "traditional museum" playing an active role in ecomuseum activities across a large geographical area. Miura also has rice terraces, but this time ones that have been falling into disrepair, but which the ecomuseum is trying to conserve and get back into production. Miura is a complex of natural sites, especially coastal ones, and sites that demonstrate features of a rapidly disappearing traditional agriculture. Woodlands, traditional gardens, farming practices and vernacular buildings make a landscape mosaic that is peculiar to the

Miura peninsula. It is an ecomuseum at an early stage in its development, but is an interesting example in that it brings together a formal museum and groups of local people who are working together to preserve both natural and cultural sites.

People are very interested in their own places in Japan, just as we are in Italy and the rest of Europe. Although Japan has far fewer ecomuseums than, say, Piemonte, nevertheless it does already demonstrate a variety of approaches to ecomuseums practice – these three sites are all different in the ways in which they work, yet all are successful in their own way. By adapting the ecomuseum to suit local needs, constraints or prejudices, and not being constrained by theoretical models, these three ecomuseums have all achieved success.