

Environment Through Culture Final Report

Introduction

This semester I had the lucky opportunity to join the Environment Through Culture class at Waseda University. I didn't know a lot about the class, except that it would be based off fieldwork which sounded very intriguing to me. Because of the small class size, and group work during class time, I was able to understand the theories we were going to put to practice during our fieldwork. When we first talked about culture and the environment, we drew a picture that represented “permaculture” to us. My picture was an integration of humans, animals, and wildlife (nature) all living in harmony together, mutually benefitting off each other without harming each other. It was important to understand this key word, before we went into our fieldwork. We also talked about concepts such as social implementation, diversity, peacebuilding, responsibility, and how all aspects of an ecosystem work together to form a niche that is sustainable. The problem is, nowadays, our earth is becoming unsustainable, with rising populations, as well as high poverty rates. This is where the sustainable development goals come in. Implemented by the UN, they are crucial in representing the future for the environment on a humanitarian level. I work with an organization that tries to encourage social development goals through the development of technology, so it was interesting to travel to Iriomote and see how those goals can affect a real life community.

Fieldwork: Kamakura

To prepare for our Kamakura fieldwork, we had to use our keyword given and try it out on Waseda University students. Partnered with Fia, our keyword was “environment”, a very broad term. To start, we walked around the campus trying to find English speakers to answer our questions. We

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were successful in finding 3 people to interview. Most of the answers we got were the same so let's focus on Tom. Tom, pictured below, is an exchange student from America. He had never been to Kamakura at the time of questioning but used his imagination to guess what kind of ecological systems there were at Kamakura. When asked what kind of trash he thought there was on the beach, he answered like I would have, based on the experience of an American beach. He assumed there would be lots of plastic food trash, and bottles, left behind by visitors, which is common in America.



When asked his solution, he said that education, our key work, was really important. It was up to the locals, to work together with tourists, to find a solution to the trash. The best way, he said, would be through the education of locals and the implementation of trash programs that would be carried out at the tourist level. Aka, more trash cans on the beach, and less plastic waste. Info seminars, he said, would especially be beneficial to the locals of Kamakura in dealing with their trash situation. His answers were similar to the rest, and he was accurate in his assumptions of the trash on the beach.

That weekend we visited the beach and local community in Kamakura. First, we went to the mountain to make compost, a dirt solution that can decompose materials faster, which is better for the environment. By mixing various items such as leaves, coffee grinds, and compost, we were able to create a mixture that is good for the earth. Then we headed over to the beach to observe the types of trash we saw. Our assumptions that tourist trash were the main items was correct. Using my knowledge from this class, it can be seen what has to be done. Education and responsibility for the beach must be taken- by the locals and by tourists. The land is common land, and although

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officially it belongs to the government, it is up to the people to keep it clean. This means taking responsibility (most tourist questioned on the beach didn't think it was their trash), and having locals educate and create programs to preserve their space. This can be done through beach cleanups, working with local stores to reduce trash, and increasing bins. Even putting up simple signs to inform tourists about their trash would help keep a beautiful beach clean. Kamakura helped me learn about the responsibility of the land. Before, I had never thought about who was responsible for the beach. The answer is within ourselves, and now I will be more careful and educate others about treating the beach with respect, which is also respect for the local people who live there.



Fieldwork: Iriomote

Our next fieldwork was the one I was most excited for. It would be my first time going to Okinawa, and I was excited to get a local experience, compared to the beach resort tourist experience I've seen most people get there. Over the span of 3 days in Iriomote, I was able to get a clear sense of the community and culture that the local people have preserved and take much pride in. It was aweing, for me at least, because being in Tokyo is a completely different experience. Everything is busy and new, but Iriomote was calming and I really felt much more whole there. During our first day there, we participated in a beach cleanup. It was shocking to me, the amount of trash from

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other countries that had washed up on the beach. I had never seen a beach that dirty before. When hearing the experience about cleaning the beach, and how they couldn't afford to take all the trash off the beach and send it for recycling, made me realize what a big problem that is. Because it is from other countries, the process to get rid of that trash is much more complicated. This is where SDG's come into play, because countries must work together to alleviate the amount of trash that is going in the ocean. Responsibility must be taken because Iriomote is facing consequences for something they cannot control. The trash is ruining the nature of the island, and through combined efforts, can be stopped. Our next activity was going on a riverboat around the forest of mangrove trees. Learning about the trees was a very special experience. My favorite fact about the tree was that it soaks up the water from the river, but it does not need salt. Because of the salt in the water, it gets put into one leaf in the branch, which is turned yellow. We were able to bite into that leaf and taste the saltiness. Because of the mangrove trees, the air is much cleaner in Iriomote. If tourist activity is increased, the air will not stay as pure, due to increased development on the land and an increase in machinery. The mangroves are a pillar of the community in Iriomote and are widely respected by the locals. It is a part of their heritage and culture, and if Iriomote becomes a World Heritage site, thus increasing activity, their presence will be threatened, therefore threatening the local ways. I was able to visit the beach near our lodging as well which was quite beautiful during the sunset. It is untouched by humans, and remains clean and pure.



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The next day we were able to visit the dye and textile making farm of Ishigaki Akiko & Ishigaki Kinsei. She created textiles out of the local land, and dyes them using natural dyes. Her farm has apprentices that come from all over the world to study under her. I felt truly lucky to be able to experience her work. The way she handles the cloth and the dye is completely natural. The dye is heated using fire, and there is no need for electricity in the process. This makes her items one of a kind, and truly a cultural representation of the land. By treating the land with respect, and using it sustainably, she is able to mutually benefit off the land. She cares for it, while creating her items with respect to local tradition and the environment. Later, they came to talk to us at our hotel, and told stories about the history of Iriomote, and how the locals want to preserve the land. The Iriomote cat, is also famous. They are preserved and not many of them are left. Several are killed or injured by cars every year. The cats also represent an important part of local culture. I learned a lot about the environment and culture from our trip to Iriomote. To see how traditional and preserved the land is was amazing. If tourism is increased, that will be ruined. The local people have taken responsibility for the land there and continued to keep it preserved and sustainable. That will change if more people come. While the local economy might flourish, it is a trade off, and it seems most local people would rather preserve their traditions and culture through the environment than give in to money. Iriomote was a great experience to have- it made me realize how traditional values still are prevalent in many parts of Japan. It is up to us, to not let them die.



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Conclusion: Final Thoughts

I have always considered myself to be an environmentally conscious person, but I never thought about it from a cultural point of view. When thinking about sustainable development goals, it is hard to put them in action unless you understand the local culture of where they would be taking place. That is why SDG's are not always effective. It is important to develop goals that are specific to the area it pertains to. Asian sustainable development goals must be created in order to preserve the culture and environment in areas. When thinking about places such as Kamakura and Iriomote, cultural context plays a huge part in thinking about the environment. We must respect the local tradition, while preserving the environment, and creating a sustainable future. The local people of Iriomote let us glimpse into their life and see how important nature and the environment is to their daily lives and livelihood. Everything has a role in the ecosystem, including humans. As the top of the food chain, it is up to us to preserve and sustain for the lower parts, so that everything can live in harmony without the interruption of tourism or pollution. Now, everywhere I go, I will look at the land differently, and think about who is responsible for it. I want to thank everyone in this class, especially Narumi Yoshikawa, for allowing me to experience and understand how important culture and nature are. I hope to be part of the experience that leads Asia to develop more sustainable goals for a better future.

