

# Experience Nature

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Many environment classes often focus solely on reading theories on environments. This is because it is taxing to physically reach the environment of study in this modern age. I too, used to think that reading is not a bad approach in learning about the environment. However, after taking this class, I am convinced that one cannot completely understand the environment in the classroom. It is only through a full hands-on experience can we truly sharpen our senses and understanding of the environment we are studying. Not only knowledge, this class has given me an opportunity to learn by connecting with people, their culture, and the nature around them.

## Connecting with People

One of our first tasks in the class was to interview people before we go to Yuigahama Beach, Kamakura. I thought that this was – albeit a bit embarrassing – not a difficult task. My thoughts were suddenly proven wrong when we actually set off to interview people. Many of our questions had to be explained or adapted to the listener, proving that not only do we have to think up of the right questions, but also connect with the interviewee. Connecting with the interviewee means we can't just shove questions and just expect clear answers, we also need to have a level of empathy so we can share their sentiments and try to see what kind of opinion they are trying to push. There are many times in their answer

where there lies a hidden implicit statement, which is what we should take hold of and inquire them more.

In my case, the challenge of interview became even more real during my fieldwork in Hokkaido. Not only did I have to experience the difficulties of having a language barrier, but coming from a suburban background, I often cannot feel like I'm on the same page with many of the guests without asking them further why they feel so. For example, I asked one of the guests why he feels bad when foreigners come and start a modern development in the villages. I would need to ask these questions because the place I grew up was in contrast, filled with development. Asking these questions however, gave me a chance to understand it from their point of view and allowed me to feel what they felt.

### Connecting with their Culture

In my Hokkaido field trip, one of the most memorable discoveries I made was the eye contact culture they have in Hokkaido. They told me that, you can truly see a person through their eyes, when both have good eye contact, neither of the speakers can lie to each other. This contrasts greatly with the culture in Tokyo, where I often hear that eye contact is intimidating and rude. There was a sense of camaraderie, trust, and connection when we all establish good eye contact.

### Connecting with Nature

I think no amount of browsing on the internet could explain how Yuigahama Beach feels like. Going there truly opened my eyes to the reality that beaches in Japan can also

get filled up with trash. On the other hand, the short walks I had in Hokkaido showed me a glimpse of how the animals there survive in the wild. Being able to observe and realize that their lives form a special East Hokkaido woods and river ecosystem of their own was an amazing experience.



*Figure 1 Journey into the forest*

## Earned Knowledge

In Yuigahama Beach, I discovered that beaches in a clean country like Japan can also be dirty. This can be caused by various reasons such as: post-summer party garbage, drifted trash from overseas, foreign traveler littering. However, looking at the kinds of trash, it is evident that the trash are mostly from summer parties on the beach. In my opinion, the usual habit of Japanese taking their trash back does not apply on the beach, where many youngsters do not really care about the effects of littering. The action of this one single group of population then spurs other people to do the same.

The trash is then collected through voluntary means throughout the year achieving beach cleanliness right before the fireworks. I think it is exactly this cleanliness of the beach that makes a reoccurrence of people littering. Visitors who do not know the amount of voluntary unpaid effort that was needed to clean up the beach, shamelessly litter because they think the beach will be cleaned up anyhow. In other words, a vicious cycle of shameless littering and futile voluntary beach cleaning that does not solve the root of the problem.

Through further interview and class discussions, our class has proposed various methods to counteract the littering problem. They are categorized into government supported solutions and community powered solutions. In regards to these, the government actually cannot or perhaps doesn't care even if they know about the state of Yuigahama Beach. Therefore, in the case of Yuigahama beach, I think a community powered solution equipped with good incentives would be best.

In my field trip to Hokkaido, the amount of knowledge I gained was in comparison far more than what I gained from Yuigahama Beach. Most of what I have learnt come from one major event during the field trip, which was the visit to a year-end meeting party held by the Kotan-kor-kamuy Association (カタンコロカムイ会). In the meeting party, various people, including some experts came from very different backgrounds, yet united in their desire to protect the endangered *Ketupa blakistoni* or Blakiston's fish owl (シマフクロウ). The owl that also has cultural significance to the indigenous Ainu people there, as they regard to owl as a deity.



*Figure 2 Shimafukuro statue on welcome gate to Ainu village spot*

In this report, I will focus on knowledge related to the owl. The owls used to be very common in Hokkaido, the first one to be documented by a biologist was even found in Hakodate. Now, there are only 160 left in Japan, half of them being near Shabecha, and half of them in Shiretoko. This is mainly caused by the change of their habitat, the forest and river areas in Hokkaido.

A long time ago, many Chinese and Australian investors came and purchased land, many of which previously filled with trees. The trees were then cut down to make space for skiing resorts and hotels. The locals around had been suspicious, but the boom of visitors coming in was but in a blink of an eye. The locals however are not truly in the white. They too confess of cutting down trees to make cow ranches, eventually making Hokkaido very famous for their dairy product. On the other hand, the number of habitable places for owls kept decreasing. This regret is what drives some people in the association to spend their time to conserve the owls. They now use the knowledge and resources they have gained from their slightly better economy, to give back to nature.



*Figure 3 Construction work in East Hokkaido*

The decrease in trees mean decrease in habitable places, as owls make their home inside trees. They also often need to stop by at trees mid-flight, one of which is also the reason currently owls are often forced to stop by electric poles and get electrocuted to death. In regards to the lacking number of trees, the association has been trying very hard to restore the forest environment for the owls. They have a program of planting around five thousand trees per year. This has continued for around 12 years, hence around sixty thousand trees have been planted. It will take 60 years to have the tree big enough to provide a home for owls, however combined with artificial nests made by the association, even young trees can provide home for the owls.



*Figure 4 Little saplings from previous years*



*Figure 5 Artificial nests for the owls*

One other part of the habitat where owls live is the river. The river is the hunting grounds for the owls, therefore critical to their well-being and survivability. However, the river has also been damaged due to trees being cut down. The forest and trees act as a buffer between the cow ranches and the river, without this buffer zone river cow manure and fertilizer usage can pollute the river. The cow manure or fertilizer seeps into the earth through rain and such, and can flow into the river bringing nitrogen and aluminum with it. This will then in turn will become a health hazard and can reduce the number of fish in the river, which can make it more difficult for owls to get their food.

Aside from creating a buffer zone, the association also protects the aquatic plants inside the river. The previously deep river have become shallower, hence the aquatic plants have surfaced onto the river surface. On one hand, this makes them vulnerable to being eaten by deer, hence the association creates fences in order to protect them. On the other hand, it creates a sort of haven spot and increases chances of fishes staying there, therefore

increasing ready food supply for owls in the river. In addition, as long as it remains protected, it will also increase the water quality in the river and reduce the amount of pollution gradually.



*Figure 6 Aquatic plants in the river ecosystem*

## Conclusion

Experiencing nature and gaining first-hand knowledge was truly an enlightening experience for me. Interviewing and connecting with people felt like it was enriching me with both knowledge and peace. I felt like I could really learn more about the environment when I connected with the people and the culture that shaped the nature and environment around them. I'm sure that the experience I've had this semester will always resurface in my mind and heart as I try to live as a better human for our shared home – earth.