

Cultural Diversity and Small Nature

In this fall semester of 2017, I participated in a class called “Understanding Environment through Culture.” As a class, me and my classmates went to Kamakura in the middle of November and Iriomote Island during Christmas to discover what environment is in the perspective of viewing through culture. I would like to express my insights and small wonders attained from Iriomote, and my findings and suggestions of why a peace management method to share and cherish the natural resource in Iriomote is crucial for us tourists throughout this essay.



In Iriomote, I had the lucky opportunity to meet inspiring people that helped our class to have a fruitful experience in Iriomote. I thank all of them for their kind givings, and amongst them I would like to introduce a total of 4 people, whom I had a chance to have deep conversations with. They are Akiko-san, a lady prestigious in the field of dying clothes with the natural resources of Iriomote, Kensei-san, a master craftsman excelling in dealing with fire to making the best quality of fabric by using natural resources, Gori-san, a canoer who taught us the gift of appreciating the Mangrove trees and the beauty of the river through canoeing, and last but not least, Sugimoto-san, who taught us how wildlife protection is done in the area of Iriomote, and why it is important for tourists to be also conscious in the preservation process of keeping Iriomote as its status quo.

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Akiko-san had a firm but gentle relationship with her surroundings, also referred to as “small nature,” and treated it as her friend. She taught us the importance of getting along with nature in our daily lives, and she expresses such thankfulness through the process of obtaining beautiful “clothing” as a gift from nature. She dyes clothes by using the natural color of mangrove and plants, and by establishing environment as the essence of nature, she incessantly emphasized that her everyday life rolls around acknowledging the value of natural resources. What we benefit from nature in our daily lives is why we should always be thankful to the environment. As I heard more of her informative thoughts, she invited me to the world of acknowledging why permaculture is necessary in Iriomote.



In borrowing the words of Kensei-san, he emphasized how the food we eat every day is all valuable offerings from the sea, and essential that we maintain an interdependent relationship with nature. He expressed both worries and delights in Iriomote becoming a UNESCO heritage, but even in his simple descriptions, I could understand the profound meanings behind what he truly wishes for Iriomote. His message of describing the mountain as the teacher for all, and Yamaneko as the god for all spirits including humans, made me realize how much I was numb and oblivious to nature.



Living in the city all throughout my 20-something years of life had made me get used to the convenience stores, supermarkets, and fancy restaurants in gaining food.



The keyword that I focused on as a source of learning in the fieldtrip to Iriomote was learning about how the circulation of water affects the lives of the local people in Iriomote. To be a bit more exact, I was interested in the rivers' environment condition within the Iriomote area. Gori-san and Sugimoto-san were wonderful mentors in helping solve my curiosity and gave me some insightful thoughts. While we were canoeing with Gori-san, she told me that the community depends on consuming and using water from the river, and it is distributed to mainly 6 different local areas within Iriomote and more out into other islands around Iriomote. I had a few questions for Sugimoto-san of the Iriomote Wildlife Center, because I was well aware from what we learned in class that wildlife protection had a lot of interference with the water environment. I was curious in knowing the characteristics of the rivers in the Iriomote area, the community that depends on the rivers for living, and the condition of the water that flows into the rivers of Iriomote. Also, whether eco-tourism has negative

effects on the protection of animals and plants also triggered my interest after canoeing with Gori-san. For example, I assumed that the gasoline that accidently comes out from ferries in the river may harm the entire ecological system.

Thankfully, he gave out very clear answers. There are many different rivers that exist around

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the Iriomote area, and a feature of the river is that, each river has different organisms living there. Urauchi River is the second biggest river in the area, and approximately 430 types of fish live there, and it is the river that has the most living organisms within Japan. People who lived in the past depended on the water and fish from these rivers, so obviously there is a deep relationship between the water environment and local people. Nakama River is the biggest river in the area, and it is famous for having fish that are peculiar and not often seen in Japan. Regarding the negative impacts on the area around the river, a lot of tourists seek to see a Yamaneko in their trips, and in order to realize those wants, the tour guides sometimes enter the area of where the Yamaneko live, and accordingly, resulting in giving stress to them.

So what is done between the governmental organization and the wildlife protection organization of Iriomote is, deciding up to what level is suitable for the Yamaneko to not feel like they are being threatened, and at the same time, tourists still enjoy tourism. This does not necessarily mean that all tourists are banned from seeing Yamaneko, because organizations want the tourists to be aware that it is important to protect wildlife by getting to see a Yamaneko. Coexistence of both the animals and plants along with tourists enhances the value of Iriomote, truly.



Moreover, too much waves occurring from the appearance of boats and ferries are hindering factors for Mangroves to live in, so the number of boats that can enter the rivers or ocean is limited. If Iriomote turns out to be a UNESCO heritage, the tickets of ferries are going to be

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measured higher so that the island can control the amount of tourists coming in, for the purpose of protecting the nature.

My final conclusion about the subject “understanding environment through culture” is that, there is no need to think of “environment” at a big stance: when looking into the term “culture” itself, “environment” is a factor that has contributed ever since the existence of culture.

The biggest influence I received from fieldwork in this class is the idea of ecological ethics. Promoting a model of peace building to reach a multicultural co-existence through environmental education, exchanging, peace business and policy making will sustain the environment at the upmost condition.

In terms of what the original concept of “cultural diversity” is, I have learned that even if Iriomote is part of Japan, it is an absolutely different area that should be truly acknowledged as “the Iriomote,” rather than a part of Japan. I came to respect how the locals adapt themselves to what nature gives them, and by showing true feelings of appreciation, the island has prospered until now.

People of Iriomote have developed the idea of “small nature,” and rather than viewing it as something massive, they knew that every single minute and second of their lives all correspond with nature as a small and friendly being. I believe that this will endure the spirit and soul of future generations in this tiny but big island.

Not only the local people, but tourists also have the responsibility to be respectful towards what they get to experience from what the locals have achieved in their land.

My earnest hopes are that even if Iriomote becomes a UNESCO heritage, it still maintains the nature it possesses as of now. Exterminating an inhumane environment through destruction and money power is the last thing Iriomote should experience. If a peace management method to share and cherish the natural resource in Iriomote is developed successfully, it will also lead to the soft and small business of permaculture in Iriomote.

The biggest initiative I learned from taking this class is cultural diversity and how it can contribute to preserving small nature. I would like to change how society thinks of environment by,

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denying the thoughts of environment as an “object” that should be “studied,” into a “friend” that we can “approach” in our every day culture.