

sustainable japan

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produced by The Japan Times Cube

Living history: You could spend a night in a castle

Satoyama~Authentic Japan

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Although castles are one of Japan's most popular tourist destinations, not many people know you can actually spend a night in a 400-year-old castle.

Jun Tarikino, CEO of Value Management Co., is the person who made staying at Ozu Castle possible, along with the combined efforts of various stakeholders in the city of Ozu, in Ehime Prefecture. Value Management specializes in revitalizing communities and historic facilities by preserving and monetizing them.

"There are many castles used as hotels in the world, but there was nothing like that in Japan," said Tarikino in an online talk session called Satoyama Cafe hosted by the Japan Times Satoyama Consortium on Nov. 30. Satoyama Cafe is a series of events that feature various rural revitalization efforts.

"Actually, we cannot make much money from this service alone because the castle can be used as accommodation only during the spring and autumn. Air-conditioning and heating equipment are not installed, for the purpose of preserv-

ing the important cultural property. But the castle stay can serve as a high-profile icon of the city," he said, explaining that it has attracted a lot of domestic and international media attention.

The town, not just its castle

Using the castle stay as an eye-catching feature of the rural city, with a population of about 42,000 people, Value Management worked on the community development of the city to make it attractive to tourists. "The idea was to monetize the whole city not by scraping what is already there and building something new, but by utilizing existing assets," Tarikino said.

Garyu Sanso villa is another historic building in Ozu that is designated as an important cultural property. Value Management has turned it into a breakfast venue for guests who stay at Ozu Castle. This way, the villa can remain open to the public from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., like most other publicly owned important cultural properties.

Value Management has transformed various other old buildings in the city into accommodations. "We intend to preserve the townscape and create accommodations that allow guests to experience the town itself," Tarikino said. Since each building is small, guests tend to go outside and enjoy walking around, rejuvenating



You can become a lord of the Ozu-jo Castle, the first castle in Japan where you can stay in. VALUE MANAGEMENT

the town and its economy.

Money troubles on all sides

Tarikino stressed that revitalizing the whole community is the key to preserve the area's historic properties, especially outside the town itself. Maintaining cultural assets is costly, but financial resources are shrinking regardless of who owns a particular property. Tarikino explained that most tangible assets are owned either by the public sector, citizens, or temples and shrines, each with financial difficulties. The public sector is facing a shortage of tax revenues due to depopulation, and private owners have issues of succession and property tax, while temples and shrines are suffering from a decreasing number of parishioners who support them financially.

Under these circumstances, the only way to preserve historic properties is to monetize them to cover maintenance costs. Making enough profit from one such property seems difficult, especially in rural areas with small populations. Tarikino also pointed out that many of the historic urban buildings were built for



While staying at Ozu Castle, you can even become a samurai. This special attraction will make you feel like you are playing a part in history. VALUE MANAGEMENT

commercial purposes and are spacious, making them easier to use now in various ways, while those in the countryside are typically smaller, offering limited capacity.

"But a townscape consists of a succession of buildings, so what if we can commercialize a whole town — 10 buildings in a district instead of just one? We can increase profitability that way," said Tarikino.

To do this, Value Management created a framework for community development based on the utilization of existing resources and assets. The framework consists of all the steps necessary for turning a community into an attractive tourist destination, including marketing, planning, formulating a business strategy and a financial framework, repairing and renovating buildings, developing tourism features, creating an organizational structure and providing operational support.

Building on successful plans

Tarikino emphasized the importance of making such a framework incorporate practices that have already proved successful in one or more areas and applying



The guest rooms are renovated in a modern way while retaining the texture of historical buildings. VALUE MANAGEMENT

it to different cities and towns in Japan with adjustments as appropriate, saying that starting from scratch in each location would lower the success rate. "If we use a different method for each city, every time will be a new challenge and we will never know if we will succeed or not," he said. "Even if the business model is the same, each city has a different appearance and culture, which we can use as they are to create values unique to that particular city."

That is how Value Management has monetized and revitalized not only 48 buildings in Japan but also several entire towns, including Ozu. But Tarikino noted that the application of this community development framework requires the engagement of all stakeholders of a town — including the local government, financial institutions, companies and residents — from the beginning. "We need to start from working together to create an entire picture of how we want the community to be, and then divide roles. It does not work well the other way around," Tarikino said. "Finally, someone has to take the risk of operating the whole sys-

tem — and Value Management is taking that responsibility."

In 2020, Value Management faced a major risk. Total sales were expected to drop by more than 40% from the previous year due to the coronavirus pandemic, Tarikino said.

Although the Go To Travel campaign, which started in late July, helped improve sales to some extent, according to Tarikino, losses were too big to cover. "We lost most of the MICE-related opportunities" — on meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions — "and corporate events have been canceled, impacting our sales seriously," he said.

Despite the difficult circumstances, Value Management continues to pursue its vision of promoting and sustaining Japanese culture. "Culture is a valuable element of humanity that is needed throughout the ages. We are dealing with something that will not come back for good if it is lost, something that we need to hand down to the next generations," Tarikino said.



For more information, please visit:
<https://www.vmc.co.jp/>

This section, "Sustainable Japan," features issues related to the environment and a sustainable society. It highlights the satoyama activities of companies and other organizations and also introduces municipalities and local companies promoting the beauty and excellence of the real Japan.
For more information, see
<https://sustainable.japantimes.com/satoyama> and
<https://sustainable.japantimes.com/esg>



Value Management Co., CEO Jun Tarikino (left) and Satoyama Consortium secretariat chief Yuto Yoshida at the Satoyama Cafe online session held on Nov. 30 THE JAPAN TIMES

Evonne Yiu, U.N. researcher and champion of forests and sea

ESG / SDGs

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The early morning sea off Ishikawa Prefecture was gentle, the fisherman sitting casually at the boat's bow. They were idling just inside a breakwater, an artificial reef made of massive concrete blocks. He pointed at the water and spoke in a local Japanese dialect to his passenger, a polite female academic who had been asking questions around his fishing village. For some reason, he trusted her.

"Go ahead. Feel it." The woman put her hand in the water. Warm to the touch, almost like a lake. The fisherman shook his head. "The concrete, it heats the water. And with warming oceans, fish are changing. More off-season catches, hybrids, rather worrying."

It was just like he had described in the *izakaya* the night before. Nobuhiro Kido was one of many fisherman she had spoken to,



Evonne Yiu

each telling her the same story: These breakwaters were hurting their sea.

Devoted to sustainability

Evonne Yiu is a Singaporean researcher with the United Nations Institute for the Advanced Study of Sustainability living in Tokyo. Her mission: to apply the U.N.'s 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) and maintain Japan's *satoyama* (village forests)

and *satoumi* (coastal seas). As a researcher with the U.N.-affiliated International Partnership for the Satoyama Initiative (IPSI), she is dedicated to a distinctly Japanese approach to conservation and biodiversity.

Yiu speaks passionately about her organization's Japanese origins. "The terms 'satoyama' and 'satoumi' mean 'forest' or 'sea,' but not as unspoiled, untouched places. The two terms also imply productivity and usefulness to humans. There are modern English terms that do this now, like 'ecosystem' or 'sustainable development,' but the Japanese language included such ideas long ago." Unfortunately, the *satoyama* and *satoumi* are facing a crisis of multiple causes. "When I first lived in Japan and drove by the forests, I thought they were these picture-perfect places. Now I understand so many are dying from the inside out."

The quiet crisis

Much of the forests seen from a shinkansen window are *shiyu rin* (private forest): 58 percent, according to a decades-old survey.

Once maintained by communities through logging, hunting and foraging, now up to 77 percent of *shiyu rin* land is abandoned or in need of maintenance due to depopulation. Millions of hectares are choked with dead-falls and overgrown with evergreen trees like cedar and cyprus. As wildlife encroaches and landslide-prone hillsides become overburdened, the consequences are often deadly and self-reinforcing. The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries has put the damage caused by birds and beasts in 2018 at about 15.8 billion yen (\$150 million), with 157 people hurt and two deaths from animal attacks. This makes the communities near *satoyama* less productive, leading to even more rural abandonment and urban crowding. "It will take not just struggling local governments, but also the more funded and competent urban institutions to manage these lands," Yiu said.

The seaside was similar. Local communities once fished and maintained industries such as fish farming, but always within sensible limits. Depopulation is also the villain here, with the added enemy of government mismanagement. Nearly 50 percent of Japan's 35,000 kilometers of coastline has been covered or somehow altered by tetrapods and other forms of concrete. The breakwaters in particular are hurting the coastlines they were built to protect, causing heated seas and "coastal deserts" bereft of seaweed. Yiu notes an interesting statistic: "At ¥100,000 a tetrapod block, there are perhaps other reasons these things are still being built."

How are breakwaters and abandoned forests linked? Yiu thinks it is obvious. "Satoumi and *satoyama* are not separate



Breakwaters lining Noto Island, Ishikawa Prefecture facing the tranquil Toyama Bay EVONNE YIU

issues. They are intrinsically linked. Everything on land — from the plastic we burn in our crowded cities to sewage runoff — could end up in the ocean eventually. And so much of what the sea gives us — fish, fresh air, salt — is incredibly important for our survival." As past generations understood, to threaten *satoyama* or *satoumi* is to threaten Japan itself.

Even with so much to do, Yiu radiates confidence. Her organization, IPSI, showcases inspiring case studies from both here in Japan and abroad. In Japan these are often organized by private companies. This is a unique aspect of Japan: Instead of being the villain, big business is the opposite. "The Keidanren" — Japan's top business lobby — "are actually some of our biggest supporters of SDGs," Yiu said. From Sony's private forest in Aichi to food processor and chain restaurant owner Aleph's work to preserve Lake Biwa, IPSI's site offers many examples.

IPSI also offers outside examples for Japan's government officials. "Taiwan is ceasing installation of breakwaters and implementing *satoyama* concepts in their environment policies, while Philippines is switching back to biodiverse solutions like mangroves and coastal forests."

Local wisdom to global action

More needs to be done, which is why Yiu was out on that boat, testing the water with her own hands. "The people who know the most — about both the issue and the traditional solutions — these aren't academics or politicians or business leaders, but the local people. They might be humble, but it's humbling for me when I can connect with them. I'm inspired to be a voice for them, and that's what IPSI does best."

Yiu's mission is a mission for everyone in Japan, and it is easy to help. While Yiu said, "It's never too late to join the United Nations!" a job change isn't required to help the forests and the sea. Instead of supermarkets, buy from farmer co-ops like Co-op Sanchoku.

Skip Sunday shopping to spend time in forests like Aokigahara. Search online for "beach clean-up," like the ones organized by Minimal Living Tokyo. You might find yourself side by side with a certain Singaporean activist with a big smile, great stories and a sense of purpose we can all share.



Monthly Times Gallery



Takehiko Inoue (third from left) receives the Latino Award from Cuervo y Sobrinos, a famous watch brand that originated in Havana, at the inauguration of an exhibition of illustrations of the Cuban city held at the Embassy of Spain on Nov. 16. EMBASSY OF CUBA



Indonesian Ambassador Heri Akhmadi submitted his letter of credentials to Emperor Naruhito on Dec. 17. EMBASSY OF INDONESIA



Panama Ambassador Carlos Pere (second from the front) and Second Secretary Georgette Constantino (front) welcome Tohoku University professors and students who visited the embassy to learn about Panama's public policies on Nov. 24. EMBASSY OF PANAMA



Indian Ambassador Sanjay Kumar Verma reads out a message from Prime Minister Narendra Modi while giving the opening remarks at an event to celebrate Vishwa Hindi Dhas (World Hindi Day) on Jan. 13. EMBASSY OF INDIA



Noto Island farmers setting up an electric fence against wildlife encroachment in July 2016 EVONNE YIU