

sustainable japan

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Joy Jarman-Walsh showcases people’s efforts on live talk show

Tourism expert balances people, planet and profit

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Years in Japan: 28

Leaders & Readers

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The effervescent American Joy Jarman-Walsh, a long-term resident who has spent over half her life in Japan and is an expert in tourism marketing, consulting and training, has a confession to make. “One thing which I didn’t realize until the last few years working with tourists is how lonely it can be in Japan,” she revealed in an online interview, bundled up warmly in her Hiroshima home.

Describing how tourists often opened up to her about loneliness, and her surprise upon hearing how they felt “they didn’t have a chance to meet any local people,” Jarman-



Recording “Seeking Sustainability Live”, Jarman’s daily talk show JOY JARMAN WALSH

Walsh reflected upon her own situation. She concluded that she herself didn’t have many close relationships with Japanese people outside her work relationships. “How can I use what I’m doing with consulting or training to help people make meaningful connections on a more personal level?” she asked.

This epiphany was the impetus for Jarman-Walsh to quit her tenured university position and set up her own consulting business, Inbound Ambassador, “as a way to put years of sustainable tourism theory, ideas and research to work.”

“Before I started my own business, I was very idealistic about sustainability,” she said. “We need to do this now!” and “Come on, government, do this!” Once I started consulting, I became much more realistic.”

Part of her change in approach was adopting mindfulness and developing a better appreciation of the smaller efforts that people and companies were making, efforts that in the long term could have a larger impact or effect. These efforts are showcased in Jarman-Walsh’s “Seeking Sustainability Live” venture, a multichannel social media talk show in which she researches and interviews guests about their work in sustainability, whether it be environmental, cultural, community-building or tourism-related.

“Being sustainable is about quality of life,” Jarman-Walsh said. “How can you maintain a balance between people, the planet and profit? If the ‘people’ part doesn’t include culture, traditions, proactive communities or maintaining a high quality of daily life for the things that you care about, it’s not going to be sustainable.”

Sustainable tourism draws upon Jarman-Walsh’s expertise, but she also learned about

the negative impact of tourism — “where the number of people (visitors) equals success” — firsthand growing up on Oahu, Hawaii. She thrived living in an environment where clean air and water were the norm but remembers very little tourism-generated money improving local businesses, people or natural areas.

That, she says, is tourism’s default, business-as-usual model, with residents experiencing the inconveniences of the tourism boom and missing out on the benefits. Yet it has been encouraging to see progress being made, such as changes occurring in Hawaii over the last 10 years.

According to Jarman-Walsh, Hawaii has come to understand “you have to take care of your staff at hotels, you have to take care of the local area, people and environment if you want the incoming tourists to also enjoy themselves. There’s a big shift from focusing solely on the customer to balancing the needs of local people and staff with high-quality customer experiences. I think Japan is starting to get that, but it is still not quite here yet,” she added, citing the status of the customer, inherent in omotenashi (hospitality) culture, as a possible contributing factor.

Finding ways for locals to retain a decent quality of life by enjoying local assets for themselves while gaining some benefits from incoming visitors is vital to the tourism industry’s sustainability and overall success, she added.

The coronavirus pandemic is a time for the tourism industry to reset, reflect and focus on marketing efforts, she posits. A recent stint of destination consulting saw her advising one client to “use this time to sustain, build your brand.” Further outreach saw



JOY JARMAN-WALSH

her advising other clients to collaborate and pool efforts in like-minded fields or areas.

“I find it’s a really hard sell to some clients; they’re like: ‘I’m in my lane doing my thing. What are you talking about, reaching out and connecting with other people?’” Most destinations and businesses have adopted a competitive mindset, she reflects.

Yet Jarman-Walsh is adamant this is harming the creation of successful international tourism policies. Instead, information-sharing and working collaboratively is key to balancing the needs of locals and visitors. Such models encourage longer stays and more money flowing into local economies. It’s an approach Jarman-Walsh says is taken up by many non-Japanese working in domestic tourism here in Japan, such as 2020 “Seeking Sustainability Live” interviewee Jess Hallams, an Australian living in Tohoku.

“Her concept is about branding the whole Tohoku area, not just region by region for a service, or product by product, but getting the whole region to (better) work together and share each other’s information in terms of inbound and even domestic tourists,” she said.

Domestic tourism is important, she says. She is reminded of her years as a participant in the Japan Exchange Teaching (JET) Programme starting in 1991, where she also met her husband.

Avid athletes and sharing similar interests in triathlons, sports and hiking, the couple spent weekends traveling around rural Kyushu and spent longer breaks traveling far and wide across Japan.

“We ended up spending six weeks cycling around Hokkaido, traveling around to the rural areas to do triathlon races, meeting

University lecturer to talk show host

Within as short as 10 minutes of speaking with Joy Jarman-Walsh, it becomes clear that the Oahu, Hawaii, native has found her ikigai, or life purpose. A tourism consultant running her own business, Inbound Ambassador, Jarman-Walsh is also passionate about promoting sustainability-focused businesses and products from Japan. She achieves this in part via her self-described livestream talk show, which is published on social media platforms including YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Twitch. As the host of “Seeking Sustainability Live,” she has to date interviewed 170 guests — artisans, activists, chefs, educators, organic farmers, people working in tourism services, community development and nonprofits, and people restoring old homes to enjoy living in rural areas.

Before her career change, Jarman-Walsh was a university lecturer of communication, business and tourism studies. She initially came to Japan to teach English on the Japan Exchange Teaching (JET) Programme in 1991.

local people. It made me feel really connected to Japan, and I could see that there was so much diversity,” she said. “It gives me hope for the kinds of things I’m trying to promote for sustainable tourism, because I want people here to also see visitors and international residents as not just homogenous.”

Continues Jarman-Walsh: “When I became a consultant I was told ... Japan is basically a ‘no’ culture, so brace yourself for rejection when you ask people to change something, be innovative or to try something that’s outside the norm. That was really good advice, and it’s definitely something I’ve seen. However, I would add, ‘Don’t give up!’ Offering reasons as to how it will benefit locals over the long term in quality of life and economic benefits can help you make inroads into positively affecting more sustainable innovation and progress.”

Mymizu’s water app just first step to ending plastic waste

ESG / SDGs

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From conservation to climate change, the environmental challenges of our times are daunting and can seem distant from our everyday lives.

But among the obstacles impeding our path to sustainability, one is within reach: plastic. That is why in 2019, Robin Lewis co-founded mymizu to tackle the issue of single-use plastic waste. In addition to spreading awareness about the benefits of reducing plastic consumption through workshops, seminars and joint product development, mymizu connects people to a network of free water-refill stations around the world, encouraging a transition away from plastic bottles and toward more sustainable lifestyles.

The project began in 2018 when Lewis and mymizu co-founder Mariko McTier were traveling in Okinawa. One morning, while walking along the beach, they came across a pile of fishing gear, cosmetic items and other waste that had washed up. Among this mass of garbage was an inordinate amount of plastic bottles.

As an island nation, Japan’s prosperity depends on the health of its surrounding waters. Yet, as illustrated by the plastic waste ending up on its shores, the country is facing a plastic crisis that threatens the well-being of its most precious natural resource.

“It’s kind of wild that we live in a country like Japan, where we’re extremely fortunate to be surrounded by drinkable water,” Lewis said. “Japan is famous for its water, and yet every year we’re seeing more plastic waste end up on the shores of Japan.” It was this experience that impelled Lewis to find a



Robin Lewis

hotels and other establishments where people can fill their water bottles for free at refill stations.

Since its establishment, the crowdsourced platform has amassed 200,000 refill points across the world, 8,000 of which are in Japan. “I’ve been pleasantly surprised by the reception,” Lewis said. “We’ve even had cafes in Kenya, Singapore and Germany reach out to us to sign up for mymizu.”

Runaway plastic consumption is a global issue, but it is especially prevalent in Japan. The nation is the second-largest consumer of plastic per capita, after only the United States, according to the United Nations Environment Programme. Furthermore, although Japan officially recycles 84 percent of the plastic it collects, the majority of that is thermal recycling — burning the plastic to produce energy. Other countries, such as those in the European Union, do not recognize thermal recycling as a recycling process.

This reliance on thermal recycling is just one example of misconceptions about plastic use that pervade Japan, Lewis said. “People think that if they throw away plastic packaging from their salad into a recycling bin, it will come out as some beautiful plastic product. But in reality, we’re incinerating most of this plastic waste, and we’re exporting it to countries in Southeast Asia and harming marginalized communities there.”

Lewis attributes Japan’s heavy use of plastic to the country’s emphasis on service and hospitality. He explained that one of the reasons why there is so much plastic packaging at grocery stores and convenience stores is because of the association of robust packaging with customer service. “Our biggest challenge is using these good intentions that people have and combining them with education and awareness to create something more positive.”

In order to spread awareness of the harmful effects of runaway plastic consumption,



Robin Lewis and co-founder Mariko McTier together with the mymizu team MYMIZU

mymizu conducts seminars, workshops and social media campaigns in collaboration with businesses and local governments. They are currently working closely with the city of Kobe to reduce plastic waste as part of initiatives to enhance the city’s livability, as well as working with companies in product development to help them find ways to leverage sustainability in their business models.

Mymizu’s activities currently focus on reducing the use of plastic bottles, but this is just one aspect of its overall vision. For Lewis, moving away from plastic bottles is just the “surface-level” objective. He understands it is impossible to stop using plastic and cut all emissions overnight, but he hopes that by making inroads where it can, mymizu can start new conversations that lead to the development of sustainable solutions and the formation of circular economies. Government and business both have a role to play, he said, and he looks forward to seeing deeper investments in renewable energy.



For more information please visit:
<https://www.mymizu.co/>

This section, “Sustainable Japan,” features issues related to the environment and a sustainable society. It highlights the ESG (environmental, social and governance) 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>



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