

# sustainable japan

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## How Mie preserves firms, farms, fishing and tourism

### ESG / SDGs

**MAIKO MURAOKA**  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Mie Prefecture, located in the center of the Japanese archipelago, has a balanced economy supported by industry, agriculture, fishing and tourism. Gov. Eikei Suzuki attended a recent online chat to talk about the role and efforts of the prefectural government in enhancing the sustainability of each sector. Held by The Japan Times Satoyama Consortium, the Nov. 25 event marked Mie's winning of the Special Award in the *satoyama* category of The Japan Times Satoyama & ESG Awards 2020.

"Satoyama" refers to rural mountains and forests used and maintained by residents based on the concept of using resources sustainably.

Suzuki became the governor of Mie in 2011 at the age of 36, becoming Japan's second-youngest governor in history. He said during the chat that having spent 19 years in Hyogo Prefecture, where he was born, and more than 10 years in Tokyo, where he worked as a bureaucrat in the Ministry of International Trade and Industry, he found many charms in Mie that locals take for granted. Now in his third term in office, he continues to work with various stakeholders to strengthen and promote Mie's

attractive features.

#### Leader in growth, diversity

Mie is known as the top area for manufacturing electronic components, circuits and devices. Its real economic growth between 2009 and 2015 was 15%, the second-highest among all prefectures. "The gross prefectural product was its highest ever in 2018 too, recovering from the grave impact of the Lehman shock," Suzuki said.

At the same time, it is also facing various issues faced by many other prefectures as young people move away to big cities.

In Japan now, at a time when the population is aging and the question of maintaining a sufficient workforce is increasingly important, Mie's prefectural government and industries alike are undertaking various efforts to make workplaces more inclusive, diverse and productive.

Last year, Mie topped all other prefectures in the proportion of male prefectural and municipal workers who take child-care leave, 38.4%. According to Suzuki, Mie has also been one of the top prefectures in recent years in terms of the proportions of women and people with disabilities working in prefectural and municipal jobs.

Suzuki, who himself has taken child-care leaves, said it is important for the government to undertake reforms starting with itself, setting an example to raise awareness in other workplaces.



**Ago Bay in the city of Shima faces the Pacific. Its key attractions include rugged cliffs, sandy beaches and fishing villages.**  
2020 MINISTRY OF THE ENVIRONMENT



**View of Ago Bay from the Yokoyama Tenku terrace**  
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**Toba Bay, famous for its kayaking**  
2020 MIE PREFECTURAL GOVERNMENT

In Mie's agricultural sector, new technologies have been adopted to make the work more attractive to younger people. "For example, to increase the efficiency of tomato harvesting, sensor and robotic technologies have been introduced to assess the maturity level and harvest automatically," said Suzuki. A variety of new technologies — such as remote monitoring and control, data analysis, drones and laser surveying using aircraft — have been adopted in agricultural, forestry and fishery sectors in Mie. "Technologies can be used in these fields to boost income by lowering cost and increasing profitability as well as to gather evidence and feedback to ensure quality," said Suzuki.

#### Loobster and Ise tea

The sustainability of resources is also an important element. Suzuki explained that lobster fishermen in the district of Wagu have made various local rules to protect and manage resources, such as using looser nets than stipulated by prefectural fishing regulations and sharing boats and revenue to prevent competition that leads to overfishing. "Lobsters are one of the 11 sustainable

seafoods listed in the Mie Prefecture edition of the Blue Seafood Guide launched in November," Suzuki said, explaining that Mie was the first prefecture to enter into a framework agreement with the Japan branch of Sailors for the Sea, an NGO dedicated to improving the marine environment that certifies and helps promote seafood produced in sustainable ways. The prefecture itself runs a strategic project named Mie Brand to promote agricultural, forestry and marine products made in Mie. Currently 20 items and 42 producers are certified. "We have partnered with the travel agency H.I.S. to promote Ise tea, a kind of green tea, abroad using its network of 264 branches in 69 countries," Suzuki said.

In addition to well-known Mie products such as Matsuzaka beef, lobsters and oysters, pearls are another specialty. However, nature has posed an unexpected challenge for pearl producers across Japan. "About 70 percent of the young pearl oysters died last year, and 44 percent this year in our prefecture," Suzuki said. Interviews, research and meetings with experts conducted by the

prefecture have shown that a combination of factors are responsible for the die-offs. "Shellfish weakened by the stress caused by various environmental factors such as rising seawater temperature and a shortage of plankton became vulnerable to the big waves and strong turbulence caused by large ships," Suzuki explained, stressing the importance of addressing climate change and preserving nature.

#### Transformation of tourism

Nature is a key element in the sustainability of Mie's tourism too. Ise-Shima National Park, one of the major ecotourism destinations in Mie, has dozens of small islands scattered along a coast with deep inlets and extends across three cities and one town.

Suzuki explained that the prefectural government acts as a coordinator connecting the municipalities, companies and residents on promoting tourism, while concrete ideas about what to offer tourists are discussed and developed by the Ise-Shima National Park Ecotourism Promotion Council, which consists of 71 organizations. "There is not much that the prefectural

government alone can do," Suzuki said. He explained that efforts by municipalities and the private sector are indispensable in satisfying visitors, while the prefectural government focuses on the promotion of tourist destinations.

Suzuki pointed out that even though the resumption of tourism is still on hold, the demand for destinations for "workations," micro-tourism and other outdoor activities is on the rise due to the coronavirus pandemic and they would like to take this opportunity to promote ecotourism.

Given that things are sure to improve, Mie will host the triennial Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting next year. "It will be a valuable opportunity for us to share Mie's efforts on climate change, resource management, disaster prevention and so on with the leaders of the 19 countries that will attend the meeting," Suzuki said.



For more information please visit: <https://www.pref.mie.lg.jp/common/content/000880984.pdf>  
[https://www.soumu.go.jp/main\\_content/000661326.pdf](https://www.soumu.go.jp/main_content/000661326.pdf)  
<https://www.miebrand.jp/en/>

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.jpantimes.com/> [satoyama](https://satoyama.jpantimes.com/esg) and <https://sustainable.jpantimes.com/esg>



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**Automatic harvesting robot used to collect tomatoes**  
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## Japan's COVID-19 response: What it did right, what it has to learn

**YOSHIYUKI SAGARA**  
FELLOW, ASIA PACIFIC INITIATIVE



Within a year, the Japanese government has issued two states of emergency over the COVID-19 pandemic under two prime ministers: Shinzo Abe and then Yoshihide Suga. When the Abe

administration lifted the state of emergency last May, Abe attributed Japan's success in keeping infections and deaths lower than in other major industrialized countries to what he called the "Japan model" of dealing with the crisis. The "Japan model" can properly be declared a model only if its efforts to bring infections under control and stabilize the economy work simultaneously. In consideration of this, during the first half of 2020, what effects did Japan's countermeasures bring about? Which policies did not work? What remains uncertain?

To review Japan's preparedness and response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Asia Pacific Initiative (API), an independent global think tank, launched the Independent Investigation Commission on the Japanese Government's Response to COVID-19.

Last week, API published the English-language version of the commission's "Report on Best Practices and Lessons Learned" on its site at <https://apinitiative.org/en/project/covid19/>.

In October, API published the Japanese-language version and submitted it to Suga on Oct. 8. The commission conducted 102 interviews with 84 government officials and experts, including Abe; Suga, who was chief cabinet secretary before becoming prime minister; Katsunobu Kato, who was health minister before becoming chief cabinet secretary; as well as numerous other senior government officials who provided insight on the background of the events.

The report revealed some best practices and lessons learned.

First, the Japanese government did not anticipate severe pandemics like COVID-19 and failed to consider possible public health crises, including the worst-case scenario. The PCR testing capacity was initially limited to about 300 people per day. Japan, in its initial response, thus limited PCR tests to people with a high risk of developing severe symptoms to make the best use of its scarce testing resources. Japan prioritized to prevent a collapsing health care system from raising the mortality rate.

Second, Japan adopted a cluster-based approach through retrospective contact tracing. Local public health centers focused on dealing with clusters, as the government's expert team found that COVID-19 transmission could be suppressed by preventing the formation of clusters. Japan's universal health care system and public health infrastructure allowed for highly effective contact tracing. However, contact tracers were not connected digitally; most doctors used fax machines to report

to public health centers. Looking back on how the government struggled to execute its COVID-19 policy, Health Minister Kato said the delay in the nation's digital transformation was the biggest challenge that hampered the government's smooth policy implementation.

Third, the campaign to avoid the "Three Cs" — closed spaces, crowded places and close-contact settings — was one of the most successful examples of communicating risk. The Three Cs summed up the infection risk in an easily understandable way to urge people to change their daily behaviors.

Fourth, elderly care facilities took countermeasures swiftly against COVID-19, as they prepared for and responded to infectious diseases every year. Since the end of January 2020, the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare has provided guidance and early warnings. The ministry urged those facilities to be proactive in preparing for COVID-19, for instance by limiting visits and managing patients in separate rooms. Such guidance worked in reducing the mortality rate in Japan, although it has the oldest population in the world.

Overall, Japan's response to the first wave of COVID-19 infections had decent results compared to other countries — both in terms of preventing the spread of infections and in containing the damage to the economy. Though it is not fair to dismiss its measures as a failure, it also is not appropriate to applaud them as a success.

We have to learn from this painful experience. We also have to be reminded that the lessons learned from Japan's response to COVID-19 had already been pointed out a decade ago when the H1N1 pandemic hit the country. The whole nation indeed forgot those lessons once the danger had passed. We should tackle the current third wave based on the best practices and lessons we learned from 2020.

For more information, please visit the following URL or use the QR code <https://apinitiative.org/en/project/covid19/>



And if you would like to read more about sustainability, please visit the Sustainable Japan website at <http://sustainable.jpantimes.com/>

## Roundtable:

### Sustainability with Ross Rowbury

English-language talk events organized in Japan

Date and time:  
Wednesday, Feb. 3, 2021

10:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m.: Talk session  
\*Tuesday, Feb. 2, 5:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. (Pacific Standard Time)  
11:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.: Roundtable

Location:

1) The Japan Times office (limited to 10 people)  
#2 TG Bld. 2-2 Ichiban-cho, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo  
2) Livestreaming

Livestreaming participants:

You will receive a URL after registration.

To join use the QR code or visit:  
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Roundtable by **the japan times**  
Contact: [jtc-csinfo@japantimes.co.jp](mailto:jtc-csinfo@japantimes.co.jp)

Guest Sho Okiyama, M.D.

Sho Okiyama is the CEO and founder of Aillis Inc., a Tokyo-based startup developing an AI device for early and accurate detection of influenza. Prior to founding Aillis, he worked as an emergency physician at the Japanese Red Cross Medical Center and was the executive officer of the Japanese health care company Medley Inc. He earned his medical degree from the University of Tokyo in 2010.

Host Ross Rowbury

Ross Rowbury has observed Japan while living and working here for four decades. Commencing his career in finance in Tokyo in the early 1980s, he later moved into public relations and communications, holding senior positions at Gavin Anderson & Co. (now Kreab) and PRAP Japan. Most recently, he headed the Edelman business in Japan for 10 years until July 2020. Ross is also visiting professor of Asian marketing at Doshisha University in Kyoto.



**The Independent Investigation Commission on the Japanese Government's Response to COVID-19 published the Japanese-language version of its report on Oct. 8 and submitted it to Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga. Last week, API published the English-language version of the report.**  
KO SASAKI / ASIA PACIFIC INITIATIVE