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Fascination with anime widened to respect for diversity, resilience

UAE Ambassador Alfaheem grew up with Japan

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Leaders & Readers

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Shihab Alfaheem's current assignment as the United Arab Emirates' ambassador to Japan represents much more than just another stop in a diplomatic career. For Alfaheem, it marks the return to a country that inspired him as a child and formed his career.

Alfaheem's first encounter with Japan came at a young age watching Japanese animation programs such as "UFO Robot Grendizer," "Captain Tsubasa" and others that used to air on UAE TV channels.

The flow of cultural productions from Japan to Alfaheem's television and other households across the UAE was a byproduct of the cultural, economic and diplomatic exchange between the two countries that formally began in May 1972, six months after the unification of the UAE in December of 1971.

Alfaheem grew up amid this UAE-Japan exchange, which shaped his life's trajectory. What started as a fascination with Japanese animation gradually developed into a deeply personal relationship with the country where he now serves as ambassador.

Before assuming his current post in December 2020, Alfaheem worked as a diplomat in various capacities with the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which he entered in 2012. Prior to becoming a diplomat, he worked in the oil and banking industries, where he got his first taste of life in Japan. In 2003, Alfaheem's former employer, Abu Dhabi National Oil Co., stationed him in the city of Beppu in Kyushu for a one-year on-the-job training program. Over the course of that year, Alfaheem became so enamored with Japan that he made sure to come back and visit at least once a year. "I really like the diversity of Japan," he said. "Whether it's Osaka, Fukuoka or Kagoshima, each place shows a different face of the country. There is so much to explore, and I am very happy for the chance to serve here."

Alfaheem's decision to become a diplomat was inspired by his desire to "give back" to his country. "The contributions I can make as a diplomat to further enhance our relationships with Japan and other countries around the world inspires me to wake up every day," he said. "Last year the UAE celebrated the 50th anniversary of its founding, and I want to do everything I can to ensure that my country continues to progress and improve its connections around the world."

Diplomatic relations between the UAE and Japan formally began in May 1972, but Japan has had a presence in the UAE since as early as 1955, when Toyota established its first distribution agreements in the region. In addition to trade, which has generally centered on automobile imports from Japan and oil exports from the UAE, the

two countries have engaged in collaborative projects such as the Emirates Mars Mission, the UAE's first interplanetary space probe, which launched from the Tanegashima Space Center last year.

Alfaheem noted that Japan is an important partner in the field of sustainable power generation. "Japan has played a significant role in our efforts to pursue renewable energy," he said, "and we're working on several different projects related to solar power and carbon capturing." Shipments of blue ammonia from the UAE to Japan illustrate this partnership. A low-carbon carrier fuel for hydrogen, blue ammonia is expected to significantly contribute to decarbonization efforts across multiple sectors. In August 2021, the UAE sent its first cargo of blue ammonia to Japan.

Last year, the UAE became the first country in the region to pledge to reach net-zero carbon emissions by 2050. One might wonder whether a country with a historical economic reliance on oil exports can genuinely address sustainability. Alfaheem addressed this skepticism, explaining that the push for sustainability is not necessarily irreconcilable with the UAE's history as an oil country. "Even though we are an oil-producing country, we are looking for sustainability. We want to celebrate the last day of sending a barrel of oil. We can only do that by being fully prepared."

As part of its energy strategy for 2050, the UAE intends to increase the proportion of clean energy in its total energy mix from 25% to 50% and reduce its carbon footprint of power generation by 70%. To this end, in 2021 the UAE government announced it will invest approximately



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\$163 billion in renewable energy. In line with these targets, the country's national oil company, Abu Dhabi National Oil Co. (ADNOC), plans to completely rely

on solar and nuclear power starting in January of this year (though it is important to note that, as recently as 2020, ADNOC received approval to develop

Sumo and travel to 31 prefectures

Shihab Alfaheem is the United Arab Emirates' ambassador to Japan.

Prior to assuming his current post in December 2020, Alfaheem served as chief of protocol in the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where he had frequent encounters with Japan. Before becoming a diplomat, he worked in the banking and oil industries, which led to his first professional assignment in Japan in 2003, when the Abu Dhabi National Oil Co. stationed him in the city of Beppu in Kyushu and Tokyo for a one-year training program.

When he is not busy with diplomatic duties or traveling to different parts of Japan to give the UAE Cup in Sumo tournaments, a bimonthly tradition that began in 1979, Alfaheem enjoys traveling across Japan, exploring its sights and regional culture. He has been to 31 of Japan's 47 prefectures, with his favorite place so far being Aoshima in Miyazaki Prefecture.

new oil and gas deposits to boost crude oil production). Al-Faheem observed that investments in solar power have been particularly successful, enabling the UAE to generate the world's cheapest solar power, at 1.35 cents per kilowatt-hour.

For the remainder of his assignment, Alfaheem hopes to continue enhancing UAE-Japan relations amid the push for sustainability. He explained that Japan's resilience is a source of inspiration that both countries can channel to achieve diplomatic solutions. "The ganbarō ('let's try our best') mentality of Japan is something you see all over the country. If there is a big earthquake, they rebuild and push forward," Alfaheem said. "This notion that one can always come back stronger is inspiring and mirrors the historical development of my own country, which began as a group of simple villages and has since developed into a wealthy nation."

CCJA winner's nonprofit Pilcon seeks contraceptive freedom

ESG/SDGs

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The number of abortions among women under age 20 in Japan was over 11,000 in 2020, according to the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare. The rate seems to be declining, but the fact that every day more than 30 young women endure the mental and physical suffering of abortion should not be neglected.

Asuka Someya, director of the nonprofit organization Pilcon, which is dedicated to addressing issues related to sexual and reproductive health and rights, was selected as one of the five winners of the Champion of Change Japan Award (CCJA) in 2020. CCJA was founded in 2017 by philanthropist Atsuko Toko Fish, who has been active in Japan and the U.S., to shed light on female leaders in Japan who address social issues and needs.

The origin of campus enlightenment activities led by Someya, who was a university student herself at the time, was her own experience of unexpected pregnancy. She knew little back then about sexual and reproductive health or Japan's situation regarding women's choices and rights.

She started to gather and share appropriate and up-to-date knowledge and information about contraception, aiming to prevent women and girls from unwanted pregnancy and suffering other sexual and reproductive health issues and to be aware of their rights.

The more she worked toward her goal, the more she realized that women would

not be able to protect themselves unless they changed the systems that affect women's health. She said there is a panel run by the Ministry of Health on a plan to grant over-the-counter access to emergency contraceptive pills, but "To begin with, the committee itself is only for discussing and clarifying what challenges may be brought about, not for making necessary decisions to actually legalize prescription-free morning-after pills."

"In addition, members of the committee had consisted mainly of men in powerful positions in the government and representatives of academic medical societies that are also mostly men," she said, pointing out that the opinions of women — who are supposed to be the central parties — had not been reflected. Someya stressed that women have the right to make their own decisions with as little mental and physical burden as possible without being criticized by anyone, and that health care professionals are there to support them, not control them.

Last year, Someya and two other activists who cooperate with her participated in the committee as specialists in the field, and submitted collected signatures and a request to expedite the process of making emergency contraceptive pills available without prescriptions. They also made intense lobbying efforts. "We received more reactions than we expected. For example, the word 'emergency contraceptive pill' made it into the Twitter trends," Someya said. She noted that something that long was taboo is becoming more and more accepted and recognized as a subject for open discussion thanks to various new



Atsuko Someya (third from left) hands the signed policy proposal to make emergency contraceptives more readily available to the former Gender Equality Minister, Seiko Hashimoto (third from right). PILCON



Atsuko Someya (left) leads a lecture on sex education at a junior high school. PILCON

cacy to realize prescription-free emergency contraceptive pills, she and her fellows offer opportunities and tools for both youths and adults to gain sufficient knowledge about contraception.

While they mainly give lectures to junior and senior high school students, they also strive to reach out to adults, especially schoolteachers, to help them learn how they can teach youths about contraception more effectively. "Older generations received old, traditional style of sex education, so we need to update their knowledge as well," Someya said. To this end, Pilcon is launching a new website, named Life Design Online, where teachers and other adults can deepen their understanding about sexual and reproductive health. They are also developing a handy kit the size of a lunchbox that contains small models, samples and a booklet to help explain what kind of contraception methods are available and how to use them. "We raised the funds to make 300 sets of this kit through crowdfunding, which we deliver to schools and drug-stores wishing to use them for education and demonstration," Someya said.

Beyond this, she stressed the importance of further efforts to change existing laws and policies related to women's health. "Even if the education advances, the situation will not fully improve if access to emergency contraceptive pills is not ensured," she said

This section highlights the environment and a sustainable society. For more information please visit www.sustainable.japantimes.com



Satoyama ~ Authentic Japan

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There are 169 UNESCO global geoparks in 44 countries. In Japan, there are 44 national geoparks certified by the Japan Geopark Committee, including nine areas that have also been registered as UNESCO global geoparks.

Geoparks are not just about protecting unique geological sites and landscapes. They provide opportunities for learning how people and nature have interacted up to now in those areas and how people can sustainably use their resources to promote their beauty and hand it down to future generations. The 20th Satoyama Cafe, an online talk event organized by the Japan Times Satoyama Consortium that was held on Dec. 7, invited three officials representing San'in Kaigan Geopark, the Mount Tsukuba Area Geopark and Shimokita Geopark to share what they have to offer to visitors as well as to the local residents.

Kazuya Ando, deputy director of the San'in Kaigan Geopark Museum of the Earth and Sea, said the geopark — which faces the Sea of Japan and covers an area larger than metropolitan Tokyo — presents evidence of when and how a stretch of land broke off from the Eurasian continent and became the Japanese archipelago. "The history of the Earth from the time when the Sea of Japan was born can be observed in the rocks, strata and fossils in the area," he said. Because of its geological value, the geopark was certified as a UNESCO global geopark in 2010.

The area — which stretches for about 120 kilometers from east to west and 30 km



Mount Tsukuba, Lake Kasumigaura, and the Kanto Plain are the main features of the Geopark. MOUNT TSUKUBA AREA GEOPARK

from north to south, covering the northern parts of the prefectures of Kyoto, Hyogo and Tottori — also offers diverse landscapes including the Tottori Sand Dunes, the town of Iwami's rocky granite coast and mountains higher than 1,000 meters. "For visitors to enjoy the scenery of the geopark and meeting local people, we opened a new geopark trail that extends 230 km," Ando said.

The Mount Tsukuba Area Geopark covers an area that comprises 20% of the entire prefecture of Ibaraki and has three distinctive features: Mount Tsukuba, Lake Kasumigaura and the Kanto Plain.

Yuji Ito, director of the Tsukuba municipal government's Geopark Department, explained the importance of the role that local residents play in preserving and promoting the natural assets of geoparks. There is a fossil oyster shell site in Sakihama on the lakeside of Kasumigaura, but it had been covered with weeds with little maintenance. "But as soon as we put up a sign there in 2017 that describes what this fossil site is about, the local residents started to voluntarily clean the site so that the enormous amount of oyster shells stuck in the stratum is visible again," he said, adding that now the area is included in geopark tours.

The geopark has 55 guides who lead tours, and Ito explained that they will also be in charge of showing visitors around a new tourist facility to be opened in 2023. "We are turning an old junior high school building into a place where we can connect people and people, and people and culture and nature in the area," said Ito.

Shimokita Geopark is located on Aomori Prefecture's northernmost peninsula, surrounded by seas with three different characters: the wild Tsugaru Strait, the quiet Mutsu Bay and the dynamic Pacific Ocean.



The Shimokita Geopark is surrounded by the Tsugaru Strait, the Mutsu Bay and the Pacific Ocean. SHIMOKITA GEOPARK

The geopark is about two-thirds the size of Tokyo.

In addition to the waters that bring a wide variety of marine resources to the area, the geopark offers diverse landscapes including gigantic rocks and cliffs, natural forests and mountains, hot springs, rivers, plains and sand dunes. "We are making efforts to make this area sustainable by preserving and utilizing the resources while nurturing a love for the hometown and improving the regional value," said Satoshi Ishikawa, a doctor of science and a promoter of Shimokita Geopark. Various activities and events are conducted for and with the locals such as beach cleanup operations, study meetings and lectures, tree-planting ceremonies and a camp event for children. He said they also use messaging services and other media to promote the area and events for visitors, including the visitor center, guided tours and markets for local products.

Ishikawa stressed that in order to stop depopulation, it is important to promote the area to make locals want to stay and visitors want to come back or even move there, saying the geopark and its resources are sustainable because people live there.

To conclude the session, Ando from San'in Kaigan Geopark said: "Geoparks make you realize that human lives are part of the diverse activities of the Earth and reveal regions' charms. Now that we are aware that many things can be done online, you have the option to live and work from anywhere you like."

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