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sustainable japan

Patagonia sets examples on food, farms and future

Roundtable

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Sustainability presents a catch-22 for the business world. While shifting to renewable energy and removing environmentally harmful materials from supply chains are obvious steps, the need to retain profitability and stay financially solvent often precludes these steps from ever taking place. This is especially true in the apparel industry, where production of new clothing necessitates processes that are often inherently destructive to the environment.

So, what can apparel companies do to genuinely address sustainability? In the 17th iteration of the Japan Times Sustainability Roundtable, host Ross Rowbury sat down with Marty Pomphrey, general manager of the Japan branch of the American apparel retailer Patagonia, to discuss this challenge, as well the importance of organizational culture and long-term vision.

Pomphrey joined Patagonia as general manager of Patagonia Japan in 2019, following a prolific career as a corporate executive, consultant and entrepreneur. He first came to Japan in 1994 as a student at International Christian University and subsequently launched his professional career



A Patagonia jacket and a T-shirt made with recycled materials from other garments (not on sale as of March)
YUIKO TAIYA FOR PHOTOMATE

as an analyst at Nike Japan. He eventually returned to the U.S., where he engaged with numerous startups as an entrepreneur for around 15 years. "Looking at Japan through the eyes of a 20-something and [now] in my early 50s is a different experience, and it's new," he said. "I've always loved Japan."

An avid surfer, Pomphrey is an outdoors person at heart, so working at the renowned outdoor apparel retailer had always been an attractive prospect. Pomphrey had also wanted to return to Japan, so when an acquaintance in Patagonia's HR department reached out to inform him they were searching for a GM in Japan, it was as though the stars were aligned in his favor.

Pomphrey's colleagues share his love for the outdoors and nature. Currently based in Kamakura, where Patagonia has a store, Pomphrey often goes to the beach to surf early in the morning. "If I go out at 6 a.m. to a local surf break, I'll find five, six or seven employees," he said. "Many of our employees live in the Shonan area, and we end up doing the same kinds of things."

This intimate relationship with the environment is central to Patagonia's organizational culture. According to Pomphrey, the apparel retailer's mission statement, "We're in business to save our home planet," is reflected throughout the organization's activities. In one of his first board meetings, Pomphrey recalled his surprise at the urgency expressed by executives regarding the need to eliminate harmful materials from their supply chain. "The board meetings are really focused on mission statement items rather than sales and profit," he observed. "[In] the first board meeting I went to three years ago, for two days it was mostly about materials: This is the worst material we have. How do we get it out of the supply chain? That was an eye-opener for me, because I had never been to meetings like that."

Despite Patagonia's reputation as an apparel company, Pomphrey did not hesi-



Marty Pomphrey, general manager of Patagonia International Inc., Japan Branch
YUIKO TAIYA

tate to address the elephant in the room: "Apparel is not a sustainable business. Apparel, by its nature, is damaging to the world. We hear a lot about sustainability, but there is no sustainability in apparel. It's not good for the environment." Instead of misleading consumers with catchphrases such as 'sustainable apparel,' Patagonia is focused on becoming what Pomphrey

described as 'responsible apparel,' which entails removing environmentally harmful materials from its supply chains. "Around 90% of our greenhouse gas footprint is in our supply chain, which is materials. What we're trying to do with apparel is get rid of any petroleum-based [materials]... and move towards recyclable [materials, such as] nylon."

Patagonia's founder, the 83-year-old Yvon Chouinard — who established the company in 1973 in Ventura, California — has a bold vision for the future of his company. "Our founder wants us to be bigger in food in the next 100 years than in apparel," said Pomphrey. Launched in 2012, the company's food business, known as Patagonia Provisions, centers on products that utilize Regenerative Organic agriculture, which prioritizes soil health and incorporates high standards for animal welfare and worker fairness. Some estimates suggest that, due to the destructive effects of commercial farming, the world's topsoil could be completely depleted within 60 years. "Commercial farming, as it is today, is really damaging. The old way of 1- to 2-acre-plot farming, that's really the best way of farming — animals are involved and you basically have an ecosystem," Pomphrey said.

Taken aback by the bold vision of Patagonia's founder to transition the majority of the company's business to food products, Rowbury was reminded of Kiichiro Toyoda, the son of Toyota's founder, who completely shifted the company's business away from loom production toward automobiles. Considering the pressing need to address sustainability in the private sector, Rowbury highlighted the importance of businesses such as Patagonia in setting examples for other companies to follow. "Spending all those resources on moving to food in 100 years is probably doing more to save the home planet than all of us escaping to Mars," Rowbury said with a laugh. "If a company like Starbucks decides to give up all plastic straws, that has an incredible impact around the world, and it's companies like Patagonia that have shown the way and set an example for those really big players. It's such a small thing, taking away plastic straws, but the impact is huge."

Rather than simply impose standards in its supply chains, Patagonia is focused on cultivating community partnerships, Pomphrey said. One example is its partnership



Pomphrey began his professional career at Nike Japan, before becoming vice president at Fossil Japan. After that, he got involved in business development projects as a consultant and entrepreneur.
YUIKO TAIYA FOR PHOTOMATE

with sake brewery Terada Honke, which was founded in 1673 in Chiba Prefecture, to produce the sake Gonin Musume. "The history of the company was really important," he noted, "and we really loved that they weren't using pesticides or herbicides and were using yeast and fermentation in a way that are good for the environment."

Patagonia is also invested in projects such as solar sharing as well as a buyback program with the startup Bureo, which works with fishing villages in South America to buy discarded fishing nets and transform them into recycled products. "I always tell our activism team that we want to be the wind, not the boat," he said. "We want to create community partnerships. We don't want to just be loud; we want to be effective."

patagonia

Roundtable is a monthly series of English-language events organized by The Japan Times Cube. For more information visit <https://sustainable.japantimes.com/roundtable>



Venture firm, nonprofit revitalize Tohoku and beyond

Satoyama ~ Authentic Japan

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Eleven years have passed since the Great East Japan Earthquake struck the Tohoku region. While many now living outside the most affected area are busy with the various problems the years bring, some people are making the revitalization of the area continuous and sustainable through supporting and running businesses.

The 21st Satoyama Cafe, an online talk event organized by the Japan Times Satoyama Consortium that was held on Feb. 14, invited Miki Kobayashi, CEO of Hitobito Inc., a venture company established in the town of Kunimi in Fukushima Prefecture, and Yosuke Komatsu, representative director of Asuenokibo, a nonprofit organization based in the town of Onagawa in Miyagi Prefecture.

One is an entity that started a new business, and the other aims to support startups and existing small and medium-size companies in the area, but both are committed to solving local issues and using that know-how to address similar issues in other parts of Japan.

Since Komatsu established Asuenokibo in 2013, the nonprofit — whose name means "hope for tomorrow" — has provided entrepreneur and business support to new residents of the town as well as local residents and business owners, and made a number of regional revitalization efforts, including the establishment of the



The Onagawa Future Center Camass, offers an free-of-use, open creative space for those considering moving into the town
ASUENOKIBO

Onagawa Future Center Camass, a co-working and event space, and a program that offers free short stays for people who are considering moving into the town.

One of their projects that was launched in recent years is Venture for Japan, a Japanese version of Venture for America, a fellowship program founded in 2010 that is designed for recent university graduates aspiring to become leaders to gain experience in working for startups.

Komatsu explained that the idea for this project came out of a conversation with an owner of a seafood processing company who wanted enthusiastic youths to come and work for him to put some of his new business ideas into action.

"There are many attractive companies and startups in rural areas having a hard time hiring young talents," he said, adding that university students are frustrated because there are not many ways to find a job other than to follow a conventional job-hunting procedure. Venture for Japan solves two problems at once, not only in Onagawa but also at the national level.

Hitobito solves local issues from a different angle. "There are so many treasures in rural areas whose values are still unnoticed. We discover such things, polish and commercialize them," said Kobayashi. They created a uniquely named organic cosmetic brand, Ashita Watashi wa Kaki no Ki ni Noboru, meaning "tomorrow I will climb a persimmon tree," which makes feminine washes and moisturizers that contain ingredients of persimmon peel.

The town of Kunimi is famous for dried persimmons, but there were two major production issues: Prices had been low since the earthquake, and huge amounts of persimmon skin removed during the production process had been discarded even though research had shown it contains substances that are good for the skin. "In addition, I had always wanted to engage in women's empowerment, and thought it would be good to start from learning about our own body from a health care perspective," Kobayashi said.

The talk session revealed what these two organizations have in common. Both Komatsu and Kobayashi had originally been outsiders to the towns they live and work in now. About a decade ago, they



The organic cosmetic brand Ashita Watashi wa Kaki no Ki ni Noboru means "tomorrow I will climb a persimmon tree."
HITOBITO INC.

came to the disaster-stricken area as volunteers to offer support in any way they could. "While doing my first job as a volunteer, picking up unbroken dishes at a wedding hall and washing them in a river, I thought that we needed to do more than this — people need businesses to continue their lives," Komatsu said. Kobayashi said she felt helpless working as a government employee in Tokyo, not being able to directly help the victims. "So I went to Fukushima to help clear away debris as a volunteer, only to be struck with a greater sense of helplessness due to the lack of my mental and physical strength. That was when I learned that I would just be getting in the way if I tried to do what I was not good at," she said.

That was how they both set off on journeys of finding how they could help and what was important in helping the recovery and growth of the area. They both stressed that local issues are often discovered through communication with the local people. "For example, I was chatting with a town's official when he mentioned that there are many aged people living on their own who frequently have trouble because they cannot read best-before dates due to their visual loss," Komatsu said, underlining that a detailed description of a challenge like that acquired through communication would have a higher chance of leading to a solution.

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