

# sustainable japan

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## Problems drive sustainability leader Sawyer to solutions

### Roundtable

WARREN MEEHAN  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Thriving in the jungles of Costa Rica without electricity or running water provided Kai Sawyer with a new perspective on how to coexist with nature. "I saw more monkeys than people," explained the multilingual sustainability practitioner, "and they taught me how to live, so I had to reprogram myself." Sawyer had an epiphany: Only humans create trash or work for money, and by seeing ourselves as separate from nature we create problems that modern society doesn't need to have.

Born in Japan and raised in Niigata, Hawaii and Osaka, Sawyer attended the University of California, Santa Cruz, where, as co-chair of the Education for Sustainable Living Program, he trained students on student-centered education and sustainability activism. Sawyer now lives at the Peace and Permaculture Dojo with his family in the Chiba city of Isumi, where he teaches sustainable living and design, and is also the founder of Tokyo Urban Permaculture, a movement devoted to regenerating the urban ecosystem through growing food and changing the culture in Tokyo. He teaches sustainable living, nonviolent communication, how to heal depression and trauma, and mindfulness at universities, conferences and community gatherings around the

world.

Sawyer took time out from his busy schedule to sit down with Ross Rowbury for the 33rd incarnation of Roundtable for The Japan Times to discuss sustainable living, "guerilla seed-planting," mental health and gaining new perspectives, among other things.

### Regenerative thinking

Rowbury began by asking Sawyer why he began Tokyo Urban Permaculture and what it is about. "Yeah, that's a hard one," Sawyer began. "The way it started was that in my journey trying to figure out how to live sustainably, I came across permaculture. Having lived in the jungle of Costa Rica, I realized this was the perfect way to live. If you have food, water, soil regeneration, living just gets better and better."

After the Fukushima nuclear disaster and meltdown in March 2011, Sawyer found himself drawn back to Japan, for he saw it as an opportunity to rally. "There's a fun phrase in permaculture which is 'The problem is the solution,'" he explained. "The energy that drives people involved in permaculture is to find solutions to problems. You're not just trying to find a nice piece of land and live in utopia, you're trying to make things better. It means to engage with the biggest problems, and use regenerative thinking to make a horrible situation beautiful. So I found my perfect challenge. I thought, OK, I've found my utopia, but I'd found it in a global-scale



Kai Sawyer, founder of Tokyo Urban Permaculture, a movement to regenerate the urban ecosystem through growing food and changing culture in Tokyo. COSUFI

disaster, and now what am I going to do about it?"

### Shifting nature's narrative

For Sawyer, the Fukushima meltdown was just one part of modern society's regeneration puzzle. "After Fukushima, I flew into Tokyo just as people were trying to leave, and the first thing I wanted to figure out was, how do we change our culture, how do we help people reconnect with nature? As much as humans belong in nature, we have decided that we are not part of nature."

Sawyer believes that to achieve this it will be important to change the stories

that we tell ourselves. "Humans, we live in stories," he explained. "These stories basically guide us — the things we talk about, the way we live, the way we do business, the way we organize societies. Then there's a field called 'systems thinking' and at the very bottom of systems thinking is what is known as 'mental models.'" As much as he hopes to get people excited about permaculture, he also hopes that, based on his transformative experiences in Costa Rica, he can change societies' basic mental models in terms of our relationship with nature so we understand that we can only come up with the solutions we are seeking if we accept that we

are part of nature and fundamentally change how we live.

### Doing something tangible

For Sawyer, mental models without action are just great stories. He encourages "guerilla" gardening and seed-planting. He happily passes out seeds to visitors to his Permaculture Dojo with instructions to find some land and spread some seeds. "It's what all animals do, whether it's monkeys or birds, often illegally," he joked. What's important is for people to challenge their beliefs and to work with nature: "It's kind of subversive but fun."

Sawyer explained that permaculture is not just about food, but also energy design, and that in the past, most homes were passive solar homes, oriented toward the sun to be warmed in winter but also shaded to stay cool during summer, assisted by air flowing through the house. "Design is huge — if we designed all our systems to be energy-cycling, we wouldn't have to waste so many resources."

### A world without enemies

Living in Costa Rica, Sawyer had to quickly realign his understanding of community. "When I was in my 20s, and really excited about community and sustainability, community meant people who were similar to me," he said. "But after my house was invaded by ants or cockroaches, I realized I had to unlearn everything and accept that the house is just Earth." The experience gave Sawyer insight into the futility of fighting "pests": "There's always another pest — how much do we want to keep fighting? Just like people — there's always someone you don't get along with, so how do we create a world where we don't have enemies?" He found that he needed to unlearn his constant habit of trying to achieve something, be productive and prove himself. "What was the point?" he said with a laugh. "I was living in the jungle



Kai Sawyer is an educator, speaker and sustainability practitioner based in Chiba Prefecture. COSUFI

with creatures who didn't care."

### Unlearning and belonging

One of Sawyer's priorities with urban permaculture projects is trying to ensure that participants in his projects feel like they have somewhere they belong. "Our modern society is always telling us that we need to prove that we belong, but if nature is your home, and you belong in your community without having prove anything, it becomes a form of empowerment when people feel like they belong, and it has huge implications for mental health, especially in a big city like Tokyo," he said. "It creates a sense of belonging, a sense of mattering, that they can go out and change the world in small, meaningful ways."

For now, Sawyer's goals are to slow things down. "I used to be the eco-warrior trying to change the world, but I'm trying to slow things down," he insisted. "One of the most important things is living a holistic life. I want to slow down but increase the quality of what I'm doing."

Roundtable is a monthly series of English-language events organized by The Japan Times Cube. For more information or to assist to a Roundtable scan the QR code or visit <https://sustainable.jpantimes.com/roundtable>



### Times Gallery



U.S. Ambassador Rahm Emanuel meets with fishermen during a visit to the Fukushima city of Soma in August. U.S. EMBASSY TOKYO



A Moldovan wine-tasting event in Yokohama brings together importers and influencers from Japan as well as wine experts from both countries. EMBASSY OF MOLDOVA



Jarman International hosts a kickoff party for Farmers Marche Japan, an e-commerce platform that delivers locally grown, sustainability-focused produce to your doorstep. JARMAN INTERNATIONAL



The Embassy of Bolivia in Japan celebrates Singani Month in Tokyo, sharing the essence of this traditional Bolivian beverage. Bartender Yuki Murakami, Bolivian Charge d'Affaires Natalia Salazar, Seiji Uozumi CEO SudoWork Co.. EMBASSY OF BOLIVIA



Botswana promotes its products at its booth at the Osaka Africa Business Forum, held on Sept. 1 and 2. EMBASSY OF BOTSWANA



New German Consul General Melanie Saxinger visits Osaka Gov. Hirofumi Yoshimura just after the Hanshin Tigers won the pennant. GERMAN CONSULATE GENERAL OSAKA-KOBE



The Botswana Embassy hosted students from Yokohama Kyoritsu Gakuen High School and the Shinei High School in Yokohama for a program on cultural exchange and international understanding on Aug. 22 and 24. EMBASSY OF BOTSWANA



Brazilian Ambassador Octavio Cortes receives a courtesy call from Aichi Gov. Hideaki Omura on Sept. 15. They discussed Omura's recent trip to Brazil, renewing the historical ties between Aichi and the state of Sao Paulo. EMBASSY OF BRAZIL

## Preserving, developing Japan's culinary heritage

### ESG/SDGs

EMI MAEDA  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

In April 2024, the Tsuji Culinary Institute will inaugurate the Tsuji Culinary Institute Tokyo in the western Tokyo city of Koganei. In line with the opening, a partnership has been established with the neighboring Tokyo Gakugei University, a national university corporation. The two institutions share themes focusing on food and the environment, and will pool their extensive knowledge and experience to undertake forward-looking educational and research initiatives. Their partnership aims to provide students with a more enriched learning environment and a solid steppingstone for successful culinary careers.

On Aug. 21, the Shizuo Tsuji Food Gastronomy Foundation hosted the 14th Shizuo Tsuji Gastronomy Award ceremony at the Tsuji Culinary Institute in Tokyo. The prize was presented to the book "Furukute Atarashii Nihon no Dento Shokuhin" ("Old But New Japanese Traditional Foods"), authored by Yukie Mutsuda and published by Shibata Shoten. The Special Technical Award was bestowed upon Eiji Taniguchi, owner and chef of Cuisine régionale L'évo.

Mutsuda's work provides a comprehensive introduction to 101 traditional foods that have been passed down through the generations, originating from various climates across Japan. Her work is like an encyclopedia of traditional foods, capturing the essence of these time-honored delicacies.

In the past, people relished their inge-



Eiji Taniguchi (left) winner of the Special Technical Award and Tani Noboru TSUJI CULINARY INSTITUTE GROUP

nuity in making seasonal ingredients safe and savory over extended periods of time. This involved harnessing natural processes in techniques such as drying, pickling and brewing. The techniques underpinning traditional foods were painstakingly developed in harmony with nature's rhythms. Mutsuda eloquently remarked: "Preserving those who uphold traditional methods and having individuals who truly comprehend their value is essential to bridging the gap to the future. I believe chefs can play a role in this. If, decades from now, people who read this book said, 'The people of the old days were amazing,' as the author of this book, I would be extremely delighted."

Yoshiki Tsuji, the head of the board of directors of the Tsuji Culinary Institute Group, gave high praise to this work, noting that it serves as a reminder of the remarkable power of human creativity. He referred specifically to Mutsuda's skillful engagement of readers' senses by evoking scents, flavors and textures. Additionally, he highlighted photographer Hiroshi Ohashi's skill in freezing fleeting moments of light and vibrant color combinations.

Taniguchi was honored with the Professional Engineer Award. Amid the worldwide trend of gourmet restaurants shifting from urban to rural settings, Taniguchi stands out for his remarkable achievement in enhancing his culinary style at Cuisine régionale L'évo, an inn nestled in the Toyama Prefecture village of Toga. He achieved this by immersing himself in the pristine natural surroundings of Toga, thereby expanding his culinary creativity and understanding of the local environment. He gathers ingredients from the



From left: Photographer Hiroshi Ohashi, Shizuo Tsuji Gastronomy Award winner Yukie Mutsuda, Eiji Taniguchi, and the head of the board of directors at the Tsuji Culinary Institute Group, Yoshiki Tsuji TSUJI CULINARY INSTITUTE GROUP

mountains and skillfully infuses them with his expertise and artistic sensibility to create culinary masterpieces.

Taniguchi said: "I've learned so much from the local community, and the process of integrating their knowledge into my own cultivated cuisine has been immensely enjoyable and enlightening. I am committed to further dedicating myself to spreading the allure of rural Japanese cuisine and wish to convey this to the younger generation as well."

Taniguchi's accomplishments have been highly acclaimed as a pioneering example of a rural restaurant whose superb cuisine creates new value for the area. Tsuji praised Taniguchi's work, saying, "Amid the accelerating changes in the society and environment related to food, it strongly resonates with the value of working with one's own body and senses, engaging with people and nature, and weaving them together over time."

The Shizuo Tsuji Gastronomy Award, established in 2010 to inherit the vision of its founder, Shizuo Tsuji, recognizes works, individuals and organizations that have pioneered new horizons through remarkable contributions to Japanese food culture. These endeavors collectively work toward preserving and developing Japan's rich culinary heritage and the knowledge underlying it, ensuring its continued vitality for future generations.

The Sustainable Japan section highlights issues related to the environment and a sustainable society. For more information, see <https://sustainable.jpantimes.com>