

# sustainable japan

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## Tottori shares ideas on revitalizing rural economies

### Three foreigners discuss efforts to promote resources and charms they found in Tottori

**MAIKO MURAOKA**  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

The fourth annual event to share experiences about revitalizing rural economies through effectively using existing resources was held at the Hotel New Otani Tottori on Oct. 28 and 29, co-hosted by The Japan Times Sustainable Japan Network and Tottori Prefecture.

In the first panel session, three foreigners talked about their activities to preserve and promote the charms they have found in Tottori.

Anthony Lieven, a Frenchman who works for the Misasa Onsen Tourist Information Center, has lived in the hot spring town in central Tottori for 10 years. He originally came to Japan to study film arts. He then went to Misasa as a coordinator for international relations (CIR) under the JET (Japan Exchange and Teaching) Programme run by the government.

"During the five years I served as a CIR, I filmed two short movies in Misasa, thanks to the support from the town," he said. After

he served his term, he left Misasa with a hope that he would come back someday. "The connection I had made with the people of Misasa helped me return here after I spent a few years away. I strongly feel that Misasa made me who I am today, which is why I want to give back to the community." He now engages in the town's promotional activities, which include creating videos using drones.

Marie Alin, also from France, served as a CIR in Misasa for six years after studying Japanese in France. Many opportunities in tourism and cultural exchange were lost due to the coronavirus pandemic, but she used the time to disseminate information about the town and Tottori in French, English and Japanese. For her contributions to the promotion of Tottori, the prefectural governor appointed her as a tourism ambassador, Tottori Merci Princesse.

She emphasized that Tottori's strength — its abundance of nature — should not be lost due to overtourism, which is becoming a critical issue in areas such as Tokyo and Kyoto. "I strongly suggest that we should not aim for a tourism boom in the promotion of the prefecture. We need to reach out to the right people by providing the right information," she said.

Richard Pearce, an Englishman based in Daisen in



Participants at the first panel session  
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western Tottori, is a specialist on inbound tourism who places a particular focus on conservation. He takes his guests, mostly foreigners, to various places to experience rural Japanese nature and leads a nonprofit that engages in conservation, including the protection of the Japanese giant salamander, a living fossil that hasn't changed in 23 million years, and its habitat.

He warned that just designating the amphibian as a special natural treasure and an endangered species does not ensure its survival. He is trying to change its worsening environmental conditions through daily conservation activities and monitoring, and by introducing the animal and its situation to the world. To do this, he promotes ecotourism and helps reconnect people to sustainable old ways. "Tottori is not included in what is called the Golden Route that connects major tourism destinations in Japan, but I want to make a new route, perhaps the 'Green Route,' that connects Tottori and other rural prefectures," he said.

### Rural *satoyama* areas demonstrate potential for better methods of educating children

**MAIKO MURAOKA**  
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The second panel session focused on the potential of upland *satoyama* and other rural areas in education, moderated by Noriko Kato, editor-in-chief of ReseMorn, a website that provides educational information.

Alexander Ginnan, a lecturer in the Faculty of Regional Sciences at Tottori University, shared his experience of engaging in a community-based activity at a high school in a mountainous area of Hyogo Prefecture that led to international exchange. "In the regional research fieldwork with the high school students, we found an old sculpture park that didn't even have a signboard," he said.

To revive the forgotten resource and reconnect people, they looked into old documents at the town office and found out who had made the sculptures: various artists around the world. The students wrote them letters in English. "A Korean artist and a daughter of a German artist came to Japan to see the park and their works,"

Ginnan said. The students' effort to find out about their own region opened the door to international exchange. Their findings were compiled into the Map of Yahatayama International Sculpture Park, written in both Japanese and English.

The Platform for Sustainable Education and Community's representative director, You Iwamoto, first visited the town of Ama on Nakanoshima in Shimane Prefecture's Oki Islands 16 years ago and spent nine years reviving the island's only public high school by introducing a new kind of education that involves students in finding unnoticed local resources and solving regional issues. This education began to attract students and their parents from outside the island, and people who had moved away started to come back.

He established a foundation seven years ago to expand this educational model nationwide, and the number of students who entered schools in rural areas from outside through the foundation's program almost quadrupled last year from the 218 students in 2019. "In one of our projects, students plan a tour of their community. It means a lot to local students to mingle with students from outside who have different eyes to find the area's charms," Iwamoto said.

Saeko Nishimura, chairperson of Chizuno Mori



Panelists at the second panel session  
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Kosodachisha, a nonprofit with a primary focus on early childhood education, said that children who grow up in forests will never become adults who destroy forests. "They learn sustainable ways of living from their daily lives," she said. The organization runs a kindergarten that nurtures children in a forest all day, a free school for older children and young adults that has a similar concept of learning from nature and the community and focuses on students' independence, and a shared house for people who want to move to the area from outside.

The organization's next endeavor is to start a maternity center in the area, which has no big hospitals or obstetrics clinic. "Unlike in big cities, where working long hours is the norm, you can enjoy and cherish life here. So, many couples start to think about having more babies, and we wanted to meet their needs," she said. She explained that the parents share the organization's sense that public education as currently practiced cannot nurture talented people who can solve increasingly complex social issues.

## Surprising facts on Tottori

**KOSUKE MOTANI**  
SENIOR RESEARCHER AT THE JAPAN RESEARCH INSTITUTE



Japan Research Institute senior researcher Kosuke Motani shared some eye-opening facts on Tottori and its potential. "Although Tottori is the least-populated

prefecture in Japan, there are 30 countries that have a smaller population than Tottori," he said.

He then named a few countries that sold more to Japan than they bought from it in 2022. "Countries like Italy and Switzerland that have proven to be stronger than Japan in terms of trade are tourism-based economies with many handmade brands. In these countries, there are no megacities, and rural areas hold economic competitiveness," he said, pointing out that superpowers like the United States, the home of mass production, cannot beat those countries in terms trade sur-

plus. "We are not living in the time of 'bigger is better' anymore. Small places like Tottori have the odds in their favor," he said.

Motani explained that deaths due to old age is a bigger reason for depopulation than young people leaving for large cities. However, this does not mean that even Tokyo can be free from the fear of depopulation. Tokyo's population is expected to peak in 2030 and decrease from then on. Motani pointed out that people who moved from rural areas to Tokyo during the postwar period, when Tokyo's population saw its biggest explosion, are all getting old, and the current and future inflow of youths is not going to make up for the accelerating depopulation due to aging.

Tottori, on the other hand, lost a lot of its working population to big cities during the postwar era of rapid economic growth, meaning that its depopulation due to deaths of the elderly will come to an end soon because there aren't enough people in the generation of those who will next become elderly. "Fewer old people means a smaller budget needed for medical and welfare services. Imagine using that money for child-rearing support," Motani said.

## Making a town a story factory

**TAKAMI AKAI**  
CEO OF YONAGO GAINAX INC.



Takami Akai, the CEO of Yonago Gainax Inc. and a renowned illustrator, anime producer and game creator, had spent most of his life in the urban areas of Osaka and

Tokyo after graduating from high school in the Tottori Prefecture city of Yonago until he started the annual film festival Yonago Eiga Jihen (Yonago Film Incident) in his hometown 12 years ago.

"In 2009, I was consulted by the city about how to revitalize the area and came back to take a good look at how the city was compared to what it had been years ago," Akai said. He was shocked to see no people in sight when he visited the main shopping street, which used to be too crowded to ride a bicycle when he was a boy.

In a fateful coincidence, he was invited

to the Locarno Film Festival in Switzerland the same year. "The festival is held in the entire town. I thought it would be interesting to do something like that in Yonago, where we have plenty of vacant stores," he said.

During the year of preparation for the first Yonago Eiga Jihen, he visited Yonago every month to recruit staff members and created a special-effects promotional video featuring a giant Leek Man, since Yonago is known for its leeks.

The first event was a great success, and the festival has been held every year ever since. "But I started to realize that the enthusiasm felt during the event subsided very quickly, and there was no trace of the area being revitalized on a continuing basis," he said. To address this, in addition to the annual event he is now planning to also deploy intellectual property in producing made-in-Yonago goods related to anime and games, plus year-round content tourism based on local historic stories and anime content. He believes that these continuous efforts, and their promotion through social media and online communities in addition to the annual event, will bring the results that he and the local community aim for.

## High school students speak

Students in the Art and Manga Club at Tottori Prefectural Yonago High School gave a presentation about their activities and contributions to the regional community.

The club won the top prize at the 32nd National High School Manga Championships (Manga Koshien). The school became the first school in Tottori to be awarded the prize. The students talked about their activities, their path to the victory in the competition and their regional contributions through creating art and manga works commissioned by local companies and members of the community.



## Social gathering and study tour: Festival, organic farms, sand dunes, mountain, hot springs

On the second day of the two-day event, the participants took a tour to the town of Daisen, Mount Mitoku and the town of Misasa, and the Tottori Sand Dunes. In Daisen, the group visited the habitat of Japanese giant salamanders and the organic farm run by Sustainable Daisen, a nonprofit led by Richard Pearce, as well as the local community center Mabuya to enjoy a vegan lunch prepared by Kazumi Pearce.

The group then participated in the annual Hono no Saiten (Festival of Flame) at the temple of Mitokusan Sanbutsuji, located at an altitude of 900 meters on Mount Mitoku, before visiting hot springs in Misasa, at the foot of the mountain, to enjoy a foot bath.

At the end of the tour, the group enjoyed a magnificent view of the sun setting behind the Tottori Sand Dunes and the Sea of Japan.



Shinji Hirai, governor of Tottori Prefecture  
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