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Suntory’s collaborative approach to water stewardship

Sustainable Japan Network

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The region comprising the city of Kumamoto and 10 surrounding municipalities is a rare example of an area where the tap water for approximately 1 million residents is sourced almost entirely from groundwater. Volcanic deposits from ancient eruptions of Mount Aso created a highly porous soil structure that naturally filters rainwater deep underground, enriching it with minerals.

This is the primary reason why the global beverage company Suntory Holdings built its Suntory Kyushu Kumamoto Plant here in 2003. The facility uses this high-quality groundwater to produce various products such as beer and Suntory Tennensui, the company’s signature natural mineral water.

That same year, the company launched its first Suntory Natural Water Sanctuary in Kumamoto to enhance water-source recharge capabilities and preserve biodiversity. Working in collaboration with experts in various fields, Suntory conducts research to identify the forests’ characteristics, conditions and challenges, formulates medium- to long-term action plans and carries out activities such as creating maintenance trails, pest control, thinning, pruning and planting. The results are verified using various scientific data and simulations. By identifying areas for improvement and regularly reassessing the forests’ conditions, the project continuously adjusts its action plan and maintains the forest environment.

Unmanaged or overly dense forests block sunlight from reaching the ground, making it difficult for a diverse range of flora and fauna to thrive. In such forests, the soil becomes hard and barren, causing rainwater to run off into rivers instead of seeping underground, increasing flood risks.

The richer the variety of plants, the greater

the array of small animals that feed on them, which attracts larger predators, creating an environment rich in biodiversity. Fallen leaves and animal waste are broken down by microorganisms into rich humus soil, where soil organisms till the earth to create a soft, fluffy surface layer that allows rainwater to seep more easily into the layers deep below.

A resilient ecosystem where various plants coexist — some trees spreading their roots widely, others extending their roots deeply, and grasses taking root near the surface — is precisely what protects soil from eroding or collapsing. This disaster-prevention function and the abundant water resources provided by nature are an important asset not only for local businesses including Suntory but also for local communities.

Suntory Natural Water Sanctuary is designed to create and sustain this environment. As of March, the initiative had expanded to 27 locations across 16 prefectures. The total area of forests being restored and conserved by Suntory exceeds 12,000 hectares, recharging more than double the volume of groundwater extracted by its own plants in Japan.

For Suntory, these efforts are not separate from its business. Water is essential for creating Suntory’s products, and the same water resources also sustain local communities, agriculture and ecosystems. Recognizing this shared dependence, the company works with local partners to protect and replenish water resources through initiatives such as the Natural Water Sanctuary, helping sustain healthy water cycles in the watersheds where it operates. In doing so, it aims to secure the water its business relies on while sustaining the communities and ecosystems that share these watersheds.

One of the most distinctive features of the activities in Kumamoto is the *fuyumizu tambo* (winter-flooded rice paddy) project launched in 2010. Typically, rice paddies are flooded before the planting season, which starts around May or June. While the rice is growing, the water levels are carefully man-



A healthy forest in Suntory’s Natural Water Sanctuary Aso. SUNTORY

aged to keep the fields filled, and then the water is drained away ahead of the harvest between late August and October. While paddies normally remain dry throughout the winter, this project continuously channels water into the fields during the winter months, promoting the infiltration of water into the ground. This serves as an effective method for recharging water outside of forested areas. In addition to this, efforts are underway in collaboration with local farmers and researchers to support a shift toward organic farming in these paddies, creating habitats for diverse organisms and exploring how greater biodiversity can help reduce pest damage.

Another distinctive initiative is the conversion of abandoned farmland into wet-

lands. This year, an initiative began to restore approximately 3,000 square meters of abandoned rice paddies adjacent to the Natural Water Sanctuary Aso into wetlands by drawing water from a nearby forest stream. Similar to the winter-flooded paddies, this contributes to groundwater recharge while simultaneously conserving biodiversity by helping create habitats for amphibians such as frogs, aquatic insects and other native wildlife. Local farmers and researchers are also involved in this project. Jun Asaki, the chief sustainability officer of Suntory Holdings, noted that it is becoming increasingly important to work with diverse stakeholders to engage in water-source conservation and groundwater recharge over broader areas beyond just upstream forests.

Allowing water to seep deep into the ground can reduce landslides and river flooding, but in recent years Kumamoto residents have still faced the problem of street flooding caused by torrential rains. The primary cause is said to be changes in land use, such as building houses and factories on former fields and rice paddies due to accelerating urban development and the expansion of industrial facilities. To address this issue, the initiative Kumamoto Water Positive Action was launched in March 2025. Bringing together partners from academia, industry and finance, the initiative seeks to create a framework that enables broader participation in groundwater recharge efforts through green infrastructure such as rain gardens.

A rain garden is a planted area designed to temporarily store rainwater and allow it to slowly infiltrate into the ground, reducing the volume of water that flows directly into sewage systems during heavy rains. It is a key piece of green infrastructure used to mitigate urban flooding.

Research and development are also underway on innovative financial mechanisms, including monetization of the groundwater-recharge value generated by rain gardens. To help accelerate these efforts, the Kumamoto Water Positive Design Center was established earlier this year. “Our Natural Water Sanctuary has been ongoing for 23 years, and we have our own specialized Institute for Water Science. We also have experience partnering with local stakeholders on water-recharge initiatives internationally, including in Spain, the United States and Mexico. We hope to act as a catalyst for multistakeholder collaboration here in Kumamoto as well,” Asaki said.

At the Global Nature Positive Summit held in the city of Kumamoto in July, Asaki and other representatives from Suntory took the stage to share the company’s nature-positive achievements, including its initiatives in Kumamoto, with participants from Japan and abroad. Asaki noted that two-thirds of the attendees at the summit were from the



Jun Asaki COSUFI

industrial and financial sectors, indicating a high level of awareness among private businesses regarding nature-positive corporate activities.

Suntory is the only company in Japan to have received the highest-level Platinum certification under the global Alliance for Water Stewardship (AWS). It is also one of the five companies that co-founded the Japan Water Stewardship Leadership Group in 2025. “A watershed cannot be stewarded by one company alone. Through this group, we hope to work with other Japanese companies, sharing knowledge and learning from one another to extend water-source conservation beyond our own sites and across entire watersheds,” Asaki said.

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SUNTORY



Times Gallery



The ambassador of the Republic of Indonesia presents credentials to the emperor on Aug. 18 at the Imperial Palace. EMBASSY OF THE REPUBLIC OF INDONESIA



Serbian Ambassador Aleksandra Kovac lays a wreath at the Hiroshima Memorial Cenotaph to mark the 81st anniversary of the atomic bombing. EMBASSY OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA



Yemeni Ambassador Adel Ben Ali Alsunaini visits Gifu Prefecture, where he praised its rich historical, cultural and natural heritage. EMBASSY OF YEMEN



Panamanian Ambassador Walter Cohen speaks with visiting Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi together with President Jose Raul Mulino on Aug. 5. EMBASSY OF PANAMA



Kosovo Ambassador Sabri Kicmari and his wife stand at the peak crater of Mount Fuji on July 17. EMBASSY OF THE REPUBLIC OF KOSOVO



Shoukei Matsumoto, a Buddhist monk, Musashino University professor and World Economic Forum member, stands with the SCCIJ board following the July Luncheon at Grand Hyatt Tokyo. SCCIJ

Tottori Wagyu dishes multiply at Hotel New Otani Tokyo fair

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The Hotel New Otani Tokyo in Tokyo’s Chiyoda Ward is holding its annual event featuring Tottori Wagyu-brand beef until Sept. 20. This event has been held annually since 2018 at multiple restaurants within the hotel, and this year’s edition is the largest yet, with eight venues serving dishes made with Tottori ingredients, including Tottori Wagyu beef, pears and sake.

Tottori Gov. Shinji Hirai, who visited the hotel during the event, sampled four dishes from the diverse, creatively crafted menu prepared by the chefs.

Regarding the beef curry with a Tottori Wagyu cutlet served at the all-day dining restaurant Satsuki, Hirai remarked that the curry had a smooth and thick texture and a sweet flavor reminiscent of chocolate, and the rich oleic acid content of the Tottori Wagyu used in the sauce ensured that it was deeply savory without being greasy.

Hirai explained that Tottori Wagyu can be traced back to the sire Ketaka, which won first prize at the inaugural national wagyu competition 60 years ago. Tottori Wagyu’s fat contains high levels of oleic acid — the main component of olive oil — and its lean meat contains a lot of glycogen, which is considered a key source of umami.

The executive chef of New Otani Hotels, Shinsuke Nakajima, noted: “It is difficult to use beef in curry. We need to achieve a good balance so that the meat is not overpowered

by the curry.” He said that Tottori Wagyu, with its strong umami, has a flavor robust enough to match up with the curry.

Grand Chef Tetsuya Yuasa said they were able to bring out the inherent quality of the meat by pan-frying the cutlet instead of deep-frying it, to prevent it from absorbing too much oil.

Regarding the chilled *udon* noodles topped with grated Shinkansen-brand Tottori pear served at the noodle restaurant Nakajima, Hirai said, “The combination of firm *udon* noodles, the umami of dashi broth and Tottori pears creates a dish that opens up a new frontier in Japanese cuisine while maintaining its traditional essence.”

Nakajima, who makes the noodles himself, said: “There is a traditional way of eating *udon*, which involves serving it chilled with grated daikon radish. The idea was to try that same method but with grated pear instead.”

Executive Chef Sommelier Nobuhide Tani had also noticed the charm of the pear’s texture and used it to create a cocktail called *Shizuku-Hana*, which is available at Bar Capri, pairing the fruit with Hiokizakura Shizuku Junmai Daiginjo, a local sake that Tottori takes pride in. Tottori’s agricultural products and sake are delicious partly due to its abundant mineral-rich underground water nurtured by mountains such as Mount Daisen.

After trying several sakes, Tani found that Hiokizakura Shizuku Junmai Daiginjo went best with the pear. *Junmai daiginjo* is the highest grade of sake, made exclusively from rice polished to less than 50% of its original size, water, yeast and *kōji* mold, with no alcohol added. “This sake is crafted using a time-consuming method called *fukuro-shibori*, where the *moromi* (fermenting mash) is placed in cloth bags and the droplets that slowly drip from them are collected, instead of pressing the *moromi* mechanically. The name Shizuku-Hana’s “*shizuku*” (droplets) comes from this process,” Tani said.

Hirai commented that the cocktail brings out the Shinkansen pear’s strong sweetness and crisp, crunchy texture, resulting in a fruity drink with an enjoyable mouthfeel.



Tottori Gov. Shinji Hirai (center) and New Otani General Manager Yoshikazu Takayama (second from left), along with hotel staff. COSUFI

Tani explained, “To achieve this texture, we crush the pear with a pestle instead of using a blender, then put it in a shaker with ice, where it is gently mashed as it collides with the ice. Since the pear is very sweet, we add a small amount of lime juice to balance it out.”

For dessert, Hirai sampled *mizu-yōkan* (soft red bean jelly) and gelato made with Shirobara milk produced in the Mount Daisen area, served at the Japanese restaurant Kato’s Dining and Bar. “The quality of the milk used in this gelato is outstanding, and its natural flavor really comes through in the gelato,” Hirai said, enjoying the textures of the *mizu-yōkan* and gelato melting on his tongue. Nakajima praised the milk for its “stable fat globules,” explaining that this results in gelato with an exceptionally smooth texture.

General Manager Yoshikazu Takayama explained that when the event first began eight years ago, the menu consisted mainly of dishes such as *teppanyaki* and steak, which allow guests to enjoy the pure flavor of Tottori Wagyu. In recent years, however, the menu has expanded to include a wider variety of cuisines, such as Japanese, Western and Chinese. Special Tottori Wagyu event menus are also available at the Rib Room steakhouse, the teppanyaki restaurant Sekishin-tei, the View & Dining the Sky the buffet restaurant and the Chinese restaurant Taikan En. “We want guests of all ages, as well as visitors from overseas, to enjoy the deep, rich flavors of Tottori’s ingredients,” Takayama said.



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