

# Insights Taken from Three Visited Soundscapes In Japan

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## Abstract

*Since the project of <100 Soundscapes of Japan>, which was carried out by Japanese EPA, was completed in 1997, I have been conducting my follow-up field researches, visiting the specific localities which were recommended by the local people for their soundscapes. This paper reports some of my findings on the three specific fields of soundscape. Based on the result of these field works, this paper discusses the significance and problems of the project.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

To understand the properties of certain soundscapes reported by other people, it is important for us to visit the localities and to meet and talk with the people who have experienced the soundscapes in their daily lives.

From 1994 to 1997, the Japanese EPA carried out a project entitled <100 Soundscapes of Japan: Preserving Our Heritage> in order to preserve the natural and cultural heritages all around the country based on the concept of soundscape. The project encouraged individuals or groups of people throughout the country to recommend soundscapes which could be appreciated in specific localities and which the dwellers wish to preserve or to conserve for the next generation. From these recommended soundscapes, 100 were selected as the symbols of the richness and wide variety of Japanese nature and culture.

In this project, I participated both as a planning adviser and a committee member. The total numbers of the applications received were 738, of which 249 applications were from individuals. The themes of the soundscapes varies from sound of natural creatures and phenomena, those of festivals and industries, and sound

of transportations such as steam locomotives. Through these applications, I became aware of a wide variety of soundscapes and specific sites where people are making most of these soundscapes throughout Japan.

When the final 100 soundscapes were selected and publicly announced, the project itself was completed. However, since then, I have been conducting my own private follow-up field researches on these soundscapes including those not selected in the final 100 (as I was aware of the fact that although the most of the 100 were selected for their ecological and cultural value, some were also selected from a political point of view through my experience as a committee member). I have already visited some of the sites in the process of my study.

Through visiting the actual soundscapes and interviewing the local people among whom were the applicants, it has become possible for me to understand the profound meaning of the individual soundscapes and to observe the various events which were brought about by the very fact that the sites were selected in the project.

This paper aims to report what I have experienced and to discuss the significance and problems of the project, by focussing especially on three specific soundscapes. For the purpose of this paper, I chose the following three soundscapes to report upon and consider; 1) The soundscape of drift ice in the Sea of Okhotsk, the most northern soundscape, 2) The rumblings of the Sea of Enshu, the soundscape located in the center of Japan, and 3) Sound of the subtropical forest and the creatures along Shiiragawa River of Iriomote Island, the most southern soundscape of Japan. All of these happened to be included in the 100 selected soundscapes.

## 2 Sound of drift ice in the Sea of Okhotsk

The advent of drift ice is sudden. One day, we notice

that a white line shines along the horizon,  
and on the next morning, or some days later, all the  
surface of the sea changes into a white world of ice  
— The sea is hidden in a world of whiteness and  
quietness, and the sound of the waves cannot be  
heard. If I listen carefully, I start hearing the whining

and wailing sounds of the ice field. This is how the ice weeps. The surging ice pushes forward and pieces of ice pile up over one another, as they do they make a creaking, squeaking and groaning sound. As the ice rises up, it forms itself into extraordinary shapes. As these shapes lose their balance, pieces of ice break away and skid along the surface of the ice field. This makes a hissing sound. The drift ice is a living creature.

(comment on an application form)

It is only along the coast of the Okhotsk Sea, the southernmost end of the drift ice, which begins in the Arctic Circle, where we can hear the sound of drift ice in Japan. The coast of the Okhotsk Sea is between two capes, capes of Sohya and Shiretoko. Along this coast, there are cities and towns such as Esashi, Monbetsu and Abashiri. As an applicant describes above, drift ice makes a variety of sounds, such as squeaking, falling, sliding, and breaking.

In February of 1999, in order to experience some of these sounds, although the applicant I quoted above was from Esashi City, I visited the city of Monbetsu which is located just around the middle section of the coast. It was already late afternoon when I arrived in the city. The first place I visited was the city hall, where I had an appointment to interview the city officials. In answer to my questions, they provided me with the following information.

Every year, since 1986, the city of Monbetsu has been holding an International Conference on the Regions of the Arctic Circle. Not only the scholars and specialists, but also the citizens often get together to compare different ways of preparing the same food to share their customs together, and exchange ideas.

On a pamphlet handed out by the city council, there was a phrase stating that "Drift ice now has new life". I asked them what they meant by "new life". They answered as follows:

In former times, the advent of drift ice stopped the fishermen of this area from going fishing, which meant they had no income during this time. Therefore, the local people living on the coast of Okhotsk Sea, sometimes call the drift ice "the white devil", and drift ice itself was the symbol of poverty. However, in 1961, scallop began to be cultivated and it turned out to be quite successful. The reason why the fishermen were able to cultivate good scallop in this area was that the rich environment of the seawater was protected by the drift ice.

A vast amount of vegetable plankton flows from the Amur River into the Okhotsk Sea and it is protected by the drift ice. It also brings a vast amount of animal plankton into the sea. As a result of the combination of this food chain and drift ice, the Okhotsk Sea becomes an excellent place for the cultivation of seafood. Furthermore, the local people started to understand that

drift ice functions as a kind of a lid on the ocean, which stops the sea salt from being blown onto the land and destroying the forest.

Based on this new findings, the attitude towards drift ice has been completely changed. Now drift ice is considered to be positively good in contrast to former times when it was considered to be positively bad. This change was brought about by the development of an academic study on drift ice by the university of Hokkaido.

From this new awareness of the benefits of drift ice, the local people's attitude to other aspects has also been changed. For example, they used to be in favor of the excavation and development of an underground oil field in Sakhalin of Russia. But now, they are greatly concerned that it may pollute the seawater in the event of an accident. If this were to happen, drift ice would contain oil which would contaminate the sea of Monbetsu.

When I asked about the sounds made by the drift ice. Mr. Funayama, one of the city officials whom I was interviewing, told me the following interesting fact. While it is true that the typical sounds of drift ice are creaking and squeaking sounds, these are, in fact, rarely heard by the local people in their daily lives. Mr. Funayama's former house was located about 300m away from the coast and the house was always surrounded by the constant sound of sea waves. However, as he says himself, one morning when he awoke, suddenly the sound of the waves was silenced. This was what signified to him that the drift ice had arrived. This sudden silence of the waves is the realistic soundscape of drift ice in the context of the local people's daily lives.

Listening to what Mr. Funayama said, what the applicant described in his application, which I quoted at the beginning of this section, became very clear to me. The sea is silenced by drift ice and "The sound of drift ice" is quietness. As the applicant says; "The sea is hidden in a world of whiteness and quietness, and the sound of the waves cannot be heard". Also, the soft and delicate creaking and squeaking sounds are only audible because of this quietness.

As the next soundscape example shows, folktales often exist where we encounter a rich interaction between the local people and the natural sounds that surround them. So, my last question to the people I interviewed was whether they had heard of any folktales or myths referring to the drift ice. However, none of them seemed to have heard of any such tales.

### 3 Rumbling of the Sea of Enshu

It is the sound of the waves of the Enshu sea that rumbles, without any rest, like high and low drums. The sound is a symphony played by the

sea and the winds.

In the spring, the ebbing and flowing of the small waves beat small drums softly together with the sound of the gravel. The voices of children on an excursion are captured on the five lines of the musical notation formed on the sandhill by the winds.

In the summer, the big surges of the waves beat big drums, washing the feet of the children on the shore. Their shouts resound to the waves like the sound of brass instruments.

The fall is the season of typhoons. From the direction of the east, the drum sound made by the waves reach us announcing a break in the weather. The sound of the waves is audible within a distance of 30 or 40 km, which reveals the meaning of the proverb; Thunder travels 2 Ri, Wave travels 7Ri". ("1Ri" equals 3.9 km in the traditional Japanese way of measuring distance.)

The winter is the season of strong winds. The sand on the beach travels from one sandhill to another as it dances to the accompaniment of the waves.

(comment on an application form)

There were several applicants for this sound, the rumbling of the Sea of Enshu, including the one who wrote the sentences quoted above, a local dweller who was born and is still living near the Sea of Enshu. All of them referred to one old folktale of "Wave Boy", which is well known as one of the seven mysteries in the Enshu district. The story of the folktale goes as follows:

Once upon a time, there was a small monster called Wave Boy living in the sea of Enshu. Wave Boy was so mischievous and did many naughty things such as breaking the fishing net. One day, a fisherman found Wave Boy caught in his net. He said, "At last, I caught you. You should be ready to be killed." Wave Boy implored saying "Please

Iriomote Island, which is located within the subtropical area, is the habitat of a variety of rare species, such as crown eagles and round back turtles, both of which are natural monuments. Because of its rich nature, the island is called the Garapagos of the Oriental world. It is the biggest island in the Yaeyama Islands, which have their own unique culture distinct from the Okinawa culture.

Four applicants recommended this particular soundscape to the project and it was selected to be among the final 100 under the title of "Voices of birds and animals living in the Mangrove forest / Soundscape of the Shihra River created by the local living

save my life. If you save me, I will return something for you. I like to let you know the change of the weather by beating the drum. The fisherman released Wave Boy, and since then, Wave Boy has been announcing the weather by his beating his drum of the waves.

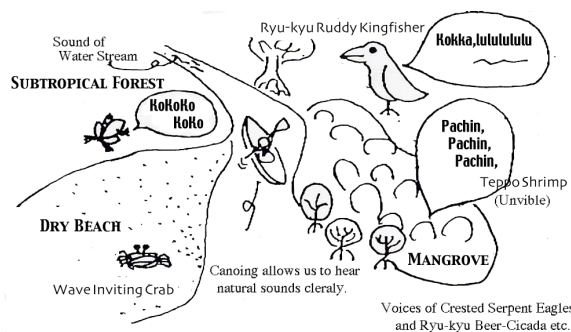
In March of 1998, I visited Nagaoka sandhill located in the coast of Enshu sea. Observing the site and talking with local people, I understood the fact that the beach itself is eroded, destroyed, and endangered by the sand of the beach is getting less and less. The decrease of the sand is caused by several factors including the construction of dams up stream of Tenryu River, the big river which flows into the Sea of Enshu and the unhealthy pine woods which were planted as the windbreakers. Some of the local dwellers, including the applicants, are very concerned about this fact.

When I visited Nagaoka sandhill, I noticed a new stone statue together with a sandholding fence standing on the beach. According to the local people, this is a statue of the Wave Boy, which was built by the local government immediately after the site was selected as one of the 100 soundscapes of Japan.

On the front side of the basement stone, the title of the statue, "Namikozo", which means "Wave Boy" in Japanese, is curved in three Chinese characters, and under the title, the brief story of Wave Boy legend is also curved. I felt that something is wrong in this statue. It is a good idea to let the visitors know the legend by a stone monument of the letters. However, as far as I felt, it has some problem to represent and fix the image of Wave Boy, which can be imagined in many ways, in this clear shape.

## 4 Sound of Subtropical Forest and Creatures along the Shiira River

creatures". This is the most southern of the recommended sites.



### **Fig.1 Sounds of the Shiira River**

( quoted and transated from the illustration  
of an application form )

It was March of 2001 when I landed on Iriomote Island. I was concerned that, landing in Iriomote island in March, I would be too early to hear the subtropical sounds recommended in the applications. However, I was able to hear some of the sounds recommended as summer comes very early on Iriomote Island.

The most impressive sounds I heard during my stay on the island were the voices of the local creatures, such as the "kon-kon kon-kon" which came from the surrounding environment when I was lying on my futon (Japanese bed) in the inn where I was staying, and the continual "kata kata kata kata" which filled the paddy field by a path. Listening to these unfamiliar sounds, I felt that I was not in Japan.

As I had never heard these sounds in my life before, it was impossible for me to connect them to any specific creatures. Therefor, they remained just as "sounds" to me. I could not put them into any semantic context. For this reason, they sounded very mysterious to me.

On the second day on the island, I visited Mr. Sakaguchi, one of the four applicants who works at Iriomote Centor for the Protection of Wild Animals, and I interviewed him about the sounds of the forest on the island as well as about the life of the islanders themselves.

Although there are many rivers on the island, the Shiira River is the optimum place to observe nature, according to Mr. Sakaguchi, because its size is ideal for canoeing. I asked him what the "kon-kon" sounds I heard the night ibefore were. But he said It was difficult to tell precisely without hearing the real sound itself. He told me that it was probably either the voices of Spotted Belly Yaeyama Frogs or the voices of Branded Crakes.

He also explained that, traditionally, the islanders who were involved with agriculture and forestry, relied on the sounds from the forest to regulate their daily activities. They sometimes considered these sounds as voices of the gods. He also told me that "eco-turinsm" was the theme which the whole island was developing. At the end of the interview, Mr. Sakaguchi arranged for me to take a canoe trip up and down the Shiira River.

The following day, I canoed along the Shiira River with Mr. Yamamoto, a local canoeing instructor. I followed behind him in my own canoe, as we paddled up stream. The further we went up stream, the less and less we heard the mechanical sounds of the port. Finally we were surrounded just by the sounds from the forest and river as shown in **Fig.1**. I heard clearly the rustling sounds of the trees and the voices of the various birds and other living creatures, which I did not hear during the motor boat tour along a bigger river

which I took on the first day. When I heard a sharp and strong chirp, Mr. Yamamoto told me that it was the courtship cry of a crested serpent eagle.

After about two hours of paddling, we were able to float back down stream, so we could concentrate on listening and observing our surroundings. Occasionally, we dipped our oars in the water in order to steer our canoes in the right direction. The sound of the water dripping from our oars on the surface of the river, resounded with crystal clarity. In the midst of this rich aural environment, I felt a profound quietness.

In the course of the tour, Mr. Yamamoto explained many things to me. The most impressive thing he said was that, the number of visitors coming to listen to the sounds of the river surroundings had increased since this particular soundscape was selected. Due to this fact, the motor boat travel company of the island had withdrawn their motor boats from the Shiira river.

## **5 Conclusions**

These three cases gave me a variety of insights into the nature of our activities in regard to soundscapes. They also showed me the significance (and disadvantages) of the 100 Soundscapes project.

For example, the last case gave me a greater insight into the need for noise abatement, not only from the point of view of our health and aural wellbeing, but also from the point of view of being able to hear the proper soundscapes of our local environment. Nowadays, these soundscapes are all too often covered by noise.

These cases also show that folktales are often ways of recording the traditional interaction or relationship between the local people and the sounds of their environment.

On the other hand, when the local people became aware of the extra aural dimensions of their environment, it empowered them to pursue further ecological activities. At the same time, it is also important that, on a purely personal level, these applicants and the local people they represented became able to extend their understanding and to deepen their appreciation of their local environments, as their comments and illustration in their application forms demonstrated.

Further to these points, in this section of the conclusions, I would like to focus on the next level of action subsequent to what I discussed at Stockholm. At the Stockholm Hey Listen! conference (June '98), I first presented the 100 soundscapes project from Japan as an example of how an awareness can be converted into action in the context of soundscape and acoustic ecology. One of the most important aspects of this project, which I tried to highlight at that time, was the fact that the project itself was an action brought about

by the awareness of concepts of "soundscape" and "acoustic ecology".

However, at the same time, I could predict from previous work in this area, that the future actions would be "designing from the bottom or inside", which is very different from the conventional way of "designing from the top or outside". (Torigoe 1998: 104)

After the Stockholm conference, Gregg Wagstaff succinctly homed in on this aspect of the project as follows: "The 100 soundscapes' project successfully raised public awareness of, and responsibility towards, the environment by means of its soundscape. This was achieved *not* by promoting a 'Self-realisation' but rather the identification of sounds as having a greater value or worth within a community by *that community*." (Wagstaff 1999: 7)

The fact that the motor boat travel company stopped running their motor boats on the Shiira River so that the visitors could enjoy the sounds of the subtropical forest and the living creatures in that area proves what Wagstaff and myself said above. The local people, including the owner and workers of the company, became aware of the value of the sounds of the river and its surroundings. They also became aware of their responsibility towards these sounds, and this changed their understanding and priorities with regard to their daily activities within their environment.

The Wave Boy statue is another example of action taken as a result of the soundscape project. In a way. When I saw the statue on the beach of Ensyu, I had an uneasy feeling about it as I felt it fixed an image of the Wave Boy in people's minds. It is maybe better for people to use their inner imagination to conjure up images in their minds eye of this Wave Boy from the marvelous aural tradition of the Wave Boy legend than to have a visual aid constantly reminding them of one person's notion of what he would have looked like.

These examples indicate that there can be a wide variety of actions as the result of soundscapes projects. Some of them may be more beneficial in the context of acoustic ecology. Some actions maybe even considered as contrary to the ideals of our acoustic ecological societies. There may even be wrong or abusive results brought about by these projects. However this does not mean that we should be discouraged from carrying out actions as a result of the project, as long as we consider carefully and continue to exchange our opinions in an open atmosphere. (Here, we should not forget the fact that the eco-tourism in Iriomote Island is based on economic and commercial considerations.)

As we have seen from the Wave Boy, legends of folk tales referring to environmental sounds are an important part of the local soundscapes. That was the reason I asked people in Monbetsu if they knew of any legends or folk tales based around the drift ice. When they replied that they had not heard of any, I suggested to them that they should invent new story which would

include the sound of drift ice. If I were from the area, I would love to create such a story myself. This could also be a future action based on the soundscape project.

At the same time, we should not consider that there are no legends about drift ice in Japan. I guess that there must be some among the Ainu people who used be the main people living in the area of drift ice. But unfortunately, the dominant Japanese indigenous people, who started to take control of Hokkaido about 1800, did not culturally interact with the Ainu people.

I also assume that other people living around the Arctic Circle must have some stories about drift ice. It would also be another action if we could exchange these stories among the people who share the common experience and environment of drift ice.

On the last day of my visit to Monbetsu, I traveled through the frozen sea on an ice-breaking ship. From the deck of the ship, I noticed the footprints of the Northern Fox. Watching these footprints as they faded away into the white surface of the sea, I thought of the so-called "Okhotsk People", who, the local people say, used to travel freely on the frozen sea.

For the Okhotsk people as well as the northern fox, what is important is not a national anthem, but the environmental sounds which form the soundscape of their daily lives. What is important for them is to listen to the various differences of the sound of drift ice to survive.

If people were bound more by the local soundscape rather than by national anthems, there would be wider and deeper understanding among the people of this new millennium.

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