Global Forum

Bouncing Back from Disaster in Urato Islands, Miyagi Pref., Japan

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Introduction

Matsushima Bay, located on the Pacific coast of Miyagi Prefecture in Japan, has 260 islands of various sizes and features a ria coastline that creates a unique landscape, making it a popular tourist attraction. With its scenic beauty, Matsushima Bay is recognized as one of the three best scenic sites of Japan and is protected under the Act on Protection of Cultural Properties. Most islands are uninhabited except four (Katsura Island, Nono Island, Sabusawa Island, and Ho Island). Together with nearby uninhabited islands, these four islands are collectively known as the Urato Islands.

With abundant natural resources provided by the ecosystem of the sea and islands, people’s livelihoods here have been supported and developed both economically and culturally. Their long history of engagement in both agriculture and fisheries has formed sustainable use of landscapes (satoyama) and seascapes (satoumi). Sendai Cabbage, a local vegetable that is easily intercrossed with other species, has been successfully cultivated on the Urato Islands. Also, the Urato Islands are famous for oyster cultivation thanks to their rich resources, and seed oysters are exported to other cultivation sites both within Japan and abroad, including the USA and France.

Issues & Facing Challenges

However, depopulation and the aging society in the Urato Islands have been challenge issues for a long time and have come to the fore in recent years. Particularly, the Great East Japan Earthquake of March 2011 accelerated the speed of depopulation from the Urato Islands. Though direct damages from the earthquake were not severe in comparison to other places, the wake of the earthquake and tsunami became a strong driving force for many residents to evacuate or move away from their home islands. While their major fisheries of oyster and nori seaweed cultivation were quickly restored as these industries are crucial for the islands, depopulation still continues and threatens the maintenance of the communities.

Collaboration of organizations under the Satoyama Initiative

After the Great East Japan Earthquake, a variety of groups, including 116 countries and 28 international organizations, have come to support disaster-affected regions for relief and recovery. The International Partnership for the Satoyama Initiative (IPSI) has also teamed up with its diverse members, such as national universities and private industries, to ease the issues and
contribute to the recovery of communities in Urato Islands, based on the concept of the Satoyama Initiative.

In the initial stages of activities, shifting the mood of communities toward more forward-looking recovery and restoration was the fundamental step in achieving success. However, although there were many different groups coming to each of the Urato Islands to lend their support, there was very little or no cooperation between different groups, and their activities were carried out separately.

Moreover, it was found that, although strong bonds could be seen within communities, inter-island bonds were tenuous. Therefore, the first action was to organize community dialogues, inviting residents from all of the islands, representatives of administrative bodies including the Shiogama City Office, and related support groups such as NPOs, to consider the future of the Urato Islands.

From community voices to action

Two community dialogues were held, in 2012 and 2013. Participants in the dialogues discussed what could be done to improve their livelihoods. The following are merely some examples of outcomes from these dialogues.

Among opinions expressed by Urato residents, depopulation was the common and pressing threat to all four islands. In order to tackle this, residents in Urato Islands identified root causes of depopulation. First, the Act on Protection of Cultural Properties, which has protected the beauty of Matsushima Bay, has become a major barrier for the residents as the Act prohibits outsiders from building new houses, meaning that the islands cannot increase the number of residents. Communities in the Urato Islands decided to advocate for the need to reform the Act. Also, a refurbished school will be used for outsiders to stay and be trained to be fisherman and farmers, and the community has improved the transportation system between the mainland and the islands by purchasing their own mini boat endowed by a supporting organization, in order to transport people from the mainland.

In addition, residents also discussed the possibility of new industry, ecotourism. Women in the Urato Islands have been particularly interested in branding food processed using locally-produced ingredients, so they often gathered and consulted with a professional chef. As a result, a small food-processing factory is being constructed in Katsura Island to scale up production.

During the dialogues, many residents emphasized the need to promote the Urato Islands, particularly highlighting the beauty of the islands and Urato-related topics. In this regard, with the cooperation of IPSI members, a documentary video for the islands was made and introduced at a number of domestic and international events.

While the above outcomes are meaningful for the islands, it was found that most of the supportive activities were tending to contribute to fisheries rather than agriculture. This resulted in an increase in the area of abandoned agricultural land, making certain people, particularly those not directly involved in fisheries, feel increasingly isolated. The issue of abandoned agricultural land was brought up during a community dialogue. Some organizations have attempted to help, but these efforts did not last long. Therefore, a new project was initiated under the Satoyama Initiative to revitalize abandoned agricultural lands by involving community residents, particularly those who are still living in temporary housing after the earthquake. The project is still in its planning phase, as it was started in January 2015. By exchanging ideas and opinions from many stakeholders, this project aims to design inclusive activities for everyone and to continue sustainably.