"Looking for the real happiness": An educational program with the island of stone money, Yap, Micronesia over 20 years

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ABSTRACT

We have organized a youth cultural exchange program in a small island called Yap in Federated States of Micronesia since 1992. Every year, around 10 Japanese young people, sometime nearly 30, stayed in a small village trying to live very close to the nature as the locals do. They include elementary school children, persons in their early 20s, and occasionally foreign youth such as from Denmark and others. Without any piped water systems, electricity, and gas stoves, they learn the way of life from the locals. They weave sleeping mats with coconut fronds, build fire with coconuts husks, and catch fishes carefully observing the tidal change; eat, discharge, and sleep. Through such very simple way of life, they recognize that the local people have created their own society and culture in harmony with the natural rhythm, and the young people understand how their own lives are supported, too. They begin to sense that convenience in cities, like instantaneous brightness with a single click of an electronic switch, is not directly connected to the real happiness. In the meantime, they also start to notice globalization is shaking the foundation of the society in Yap. An island as an isolated space is an ideal place to see the harmony and confusion of human–nature relationship directly. Among the yapese children who came to Japan by our invitation whom observed very dirty seawater in Tokyo Bay, one girl became strongly interested in the environment and later became a director of the environmental protection agency in the Yap state government. A small island invites individuals to think about life itself and is a learning space for the sustainability of the globe itself.

Keywords: ECOPLUS · Environmental education · Micronesia · Sustainability · Takano Takako · Yap island

INTRODUCTION—ABOUT ECOPLUS

ECOPLUS (http://www.ecoplus.jp/) started its activities in 1992 when we took 13 students, ranging from a 5th grade elementary school boy to a 2nd year high school girl, to Yap Island in Micronesia. Since then, we have been organizing a
number of projects as environmental education. Our organization was granted legal status in 2004 as a non-profit organization registered at Cabinet Office, Government of Japan. Dr. Takano Takako is the executive director of ECOPLUS. She has a Ph.D. in outdoor/ environmental education from the University of Edinburgh. One of the key concepts of ECOPLUS is “Human, Nature and Multi-cultures.” We have been focusing not only on the natural environment, but also humans or society, and the cultures and traditions within the society. Our fields include the Tokyo metropolitan area, where we conduct indoor lectures on the environment or sustainability, as well as outdoor experiential activities in suburbs. Some areas in Niigata prefecture are also important fields for us, where more traditional life style close to the nature is still intact. Our fields also include Yap, a small island in Western Pacific Ocean and I will talk about the island today.

ABOUT YAP

Yap is a small tropical island that is situated at latitude 9° north, and one of the four states of Federated States of Micronesia. In Yap state, 12,000 people inhabit 130 islands, and around 8,000 live on the main island of Yap. Yap still holds strong traditions and culture, and “stone money” is well known.

YAP PROGRAM

As I mentioned earlier, we started the program in 1992. Since then we have been organizing the trip almost every year. During the program, we do not stay in commercial accommodations in the central town of the island. We always stay in a local village and work with local people (Fig. 1). Building cooking fire with dried coconuts shells, catching fish and crabs, weaving sleeping mats with coconut fronds and talking with local elders, participants spend time the same
way local youth do (Figs. 2, 3, 4, 5). Through experiencing the traditional ways of life in Yap, Japanese students start to question the real meaning of life. In Japan, human waste goes away immediately after flushing the toilet, but in Yap, a toilet is in a bush or in the ocean, and feces are later decomposed biologically. Students start to recognize the cycle of eating something, digesting it, and excreting it. Students begin to dry coconut shells and woods for cooking under the strong sunshine. Local ladies teach how to get huge taros from their patches as well as the way to prepare them. Through experientially learning local skills and knowledge, students begin to see how people keep their life style harmoniously with the nature.

Fig. 2. (Left) Participants learn how to weave sleeping mat with coconuts fronds from local villages. (Right) One of the most important skills on the island is husking coconuts. With this skill, you can get fresh juice, coconuts milk and materials for fire.

Fig. 3. (Left) Cooking on an open fire is very far from student’s daily life in Japan. (Right) Students often join community works. In this picture, local people are re-opening a traditional water passage in the mangrove forest.
Comments on values: the followings are from the participants.

I cannot continue to be selfish.
Simplicity is cooler than hi-tech products.
I do not exist just by myself.
The wealth and happiness comes from relationships with the other people.
I learnt to actively live, not merely existing.

Attitudinal change: participants reported their change of attitudes after the program.

Less shopping and consumption
More aware of world news
More consideration for their families
Engagement with traditional occasions
More aware of the origin of food
Cooking for oneself rather than eating out or buying ready-made meals

HISTORY OF 20 YEARS

Since 1992, we have had more than 400 participants in total. The youngest participant in the first program, 5th grade then, is now a well-matured.
Young gentleman and some girls have become mothers. In 1997, we invited the students from Yap to Japan. Among 11 youth invited from Yap, one high school girl became a director of Environment Protection Agency of Yap State Government (Fig. 6). She says that the trip made her interested in environmental issues, and a visit to a huge garbage-dumping site in Tokyo was a wake-up-call.

One of the reasons that we manage to continue the program for so many
years is our good relationship with Department of Education and other official departments of Yap State as well as local communities. In these two decades, many aided development projects were conducted in the island. The paved roads are constructed, and power cables and telephone lines got expanded covering almost the entire island. Coin operated washing machines stand in every village and cheap synthetic detergent is heavily in use. The unprocessed bubbling water out of those Laundromats runs into the ocean directly. Many sustainability issues are occurring and from that perspective, ironically, Yap carries more value for younger generations from outside. Recently, Waseda University started conducting trips to Yap as one of the classes for undergraduate students with support from ECOPLUS focusing on sustainable society and role of citizens.

Changes in two decades are immense. So-called “developments” made the life on the island very modern and simultaneously very confused and troubled (Fig. 7). With introduced refrigerators, people started to keep caught fishes rather than sharing those in the village. People started to sell fishes and lobsters which lead to overfishing and illegal fishing. Now, people complain the dramatic decline of marine resources. Younger generations leave villages to go to town, or to cities in the US. Depopulation and aging of communities is clear. How those villagers can keep their lifestyle in harmony with nature, or how they survive in modern global economic society is a new challenge for the island. The wave of modernization is heavily shaking the small society at this moment.

Fig. 7. Tourists from a cruise ship visits the village. They simply rushed to local ladies in their traditional attire to take photos. Sometimes visitors are drunk and young villagers get confused.

OPPORTUNITIES

In such a small island, it is easier to observe how the society gets impacted from what people do in the area. Cause and result in a small island is linked more direct than in big societies. In that sense, the island would be the best place to understand the sustainability issues. How to make the local economy
sustainable? How can nature and human activities coexist? It is good for the islanders and also for people from outside to discuss openly. The island would be a learning space and a showcase for the sustainable society. People from outside can stay in the villages as we do and can learn the ways to live harmoniously with nature. Local people may generate small sustainable businesses like coconut soap, artworks, and local food for cash to live. A concept like “Island of sustainability” could be materialized in every small island but Yap has advantages as the islands have strongly kept their own traditional life style until very recent time.

COMMENTS AND QUESTIONS AT THE WORKSHOP

Nakagawa: The dumping area in Yap island, is this the only one? Are they dumping in to the sea? What do they think about piling up waste?

Ohmae: There is only one dumping site in Yap. The local communities have very small holes to throw waste in but the major dumping site is only here. The people are very concerned about the garbage or dumping things. They started separating the garbage into old tires and car batteries... but there is no way to go. This is a difficult problem. You need money to remove the garbage from there. There is no commercial mechanism or official governmental money there. People know that this is problematic. They have already identified that the downstream of the dumping site has different smells and dirty colored water is just flowing in to the ocean. They are actually complaining about this but they don’t have any means to process things.

Huang: Earlier in the morning, you said you were trying to raise fund every day. Why do you need money? If you are teaching sustainable life to youths, why is your system not sustainable? Do the young people pay for this trip?

Ohmae: That’s a global issue. Everyone is talking about sustainable issues but they need to get funding. The younger generation is paying the costs for their trip. For these trips, we don’t have any funding from outside. This is a very self-sustained project. But it is not so easy for the young generation to pay for the trip. The air fare is quite expensive because the airline is monopolized in such a rural place. For the air fare only, you have to have 150,000~160,000 yen. So we
have them pay later, after they get a job. Sometimes the participant pays back after five years. What I’m concerned about the situation is not the Japanese side but the Micronesian side. In terms of generating cash, they don’t have such businesses. Like Palau, the top portion of high school graduates goes to the US as the army. Some of our friends already served in Iraq and Afghan. Some are killed in the action, in Yap almost ten young people were killed in action. It’s ironic. Because they were killed in action, the American government pays some pension to the family but the money itself is based on a totally different standard from their life. So they have 40,000 USD per year and this makes them crazy. In fact there was so much trouble later in the remained family. It’s a double tragedy. I’m really wondering how those communities can live on in such a global economy and how harmoniously in their nature. We have so many specialists in this room, marine biology, plant biology, dengue fever… It’s kind of a good example how the academics can contribute to the real society. As Dr. Kachi mentioned before, “island” is a quite an easy place to understand such complicated global weakness.

**Takakuwa:** It is very good experience for young generations. Do you always visit the same village in Yap Island?

**Ohmae:** We travel to different places. Of course, some conditions are needed, so we are using four or five communities and rotating.

**Takakuwa:** I am a little confused. In the last part of your presentation, you were showing that the tourists were taking photos then they paid money. Is that village different from the site where you stayed?

**Ohmae:** No, that was the village we stayed in this year. Only one village is accepting such international travelers.

**Takakuwa:** So the other villagers will notice that villagers get lots of money from tourists. What do they think about that?

**Ohmae:** In some villages, they used to accept travelers but they stopped because of such an impact of cash on the younger generation. The village in the presentation is also considering if it’s wise or not to keep accepting travelers but it’s really difficult.
**Takakuwa:** How did you negotiate with the villagers to become a host?

**Ohmae:** We know the father’s generation well and since that time we have been keeping a very close tie so they allow us to stay. I never stay in hotels in Yap. The people are accepting us as friends or really just partners so even in such village we don’t pay anything. We were given the opportunity.

**Takakuwa:** We understand that Eco tourism is very important but it is difficult to negotiate so I’d understand if you had to paid lots of money and things to accept service.

**Ohmae:** It’s just the same as having your friend over at your house. You accept your friends to your house and of course you provide everything you can do and when we visit our friends place we bring souvenirs and so on. It’s not like calculating a digit but just an exchange of heart and mind. It’s really difficult to decide how much money I should contribute to them because next I need to accept them.

**Kurokawa:** How many days is your program?

**Ohmae:** Almost two weeks.

**Kurokawa:** At TMU, we go to Izu Oshima Island and stay for only two days and share experience and human communication. After the stay, I feel the participants change but the University requires proof so we took questionnaires and used statistics to see if they changed and it shows that they did change. So I believe even the small experience changes the young people in the programs.

**Ohmae:** I also encourage them to speak about their experiences to friends and family. Once having such an experience in Micronesia, somewhere outside of their country, they start thinking about their own places, relatives, families and family trees. Some start going to their grandparents to talk about the life in old days. That’s what we really hope to do.

**Shikida:** In your presentation, you criticized the Russian tourists taking photos of naked local people. But in reality, some local people
obtain from that activity. It’s very hard to criticize them for obtaining money because once they obtain money they have the pleasure to use money, the pleasure of consumption. How would you plan a transition from conventional tourism to local eco-tourism except for long term education?

Ohmae: What I’ll show to you in comparison to the Russians is good tourism. This was conducted by an American tourism company. They are under very good control of their guide, on the boat they are given a deep lecture so they know how to behave on the island. But this is actually really difficult. Island by island, the traditions and customs are totally different which makes it difficult to inform tourists. But if you carefully manage the preparations it is possible. Of course, you also have to think of the impact of size. The village is a quite small place and if you have 500 people going there, there is no modern toilet for these people so we need to have such precautions. I’m not denying a hundred percent the possibility of tourism but a carefully woven program may provide the most benefit. Through their conversation and exposure to the well-prepared Western people, they earn not just the exchange of money but good learning opportunities. Whereas the encounter with the drunken Russian tourists, they will never learn from them and will just try to get money only. The leaders know these things very well. At this moment, they have no way to deny or distinguish good or bad tourists. I think some mechanism can make eco-tourism harmonious with the community.

Numata: Is there any local travel agency on this island?

Ohmae: Some small hotels act as travel agencies. There is also a tourist bureau but they just take people on the bus and get small tips.

Numata: I think they need an intermediate between the outside tourists and local people.

Charles: To a certain extent, you’re trying to set this up two ways, aren’t you? You said you brought a group in 1997 and you’re trying to bring another group this year. What are the goals for those you bring out of that community into such consumer society that displays all the values that you are trying to teach young Japanese to think again about? What are the goals for the groups that you bring out?
Ohmae: Originally, it was a deep question among us if it is good or bad to take them to be exposed in a so called modern world. But after observing their environment, sooner or later they will be consumed by the wave of modernization. If they should encounter such modernization, we could arrange contacts in some organized way, to show them the dark side and the bright side together so they have a choice to go by themselves. Such information would be good for the future.

Long: You said that you took them to see the garbage in Tokyo. What else did they do? Did they plant rice or shovel snow?

Ohmae: Actually, we do those things. We are planning to take them to the snowy area and camp on the snow, then come back to the city in time for the cherry blossoms, go to the Tsukiji fish market and others.

Maya: I would like to ask Mr. Ohmae two questions. In your presentation you mentioned about making coconut oil soap or accessories from coconuts to generate a small income for the people of Yap. For example, in Kenya bead accessories are very common as souvenirs but because tourism is so common in Kenya now, you can buy the same kind of beads with the same kind of quality anywhere. So the questions are, how do they use coconut or coconut oil in their real life and if they were to make them into merchandise how will they make it different from any other soap you can get?

Ohmae: They use coconut oil as general medicine to treat burns and mosquito bites. The ladies like to put it on as moisturizer. It’s a very common item. As for the coconut soap, it is not intended for general sales. While I was in Yap, I noticed that chemical detergents are really common and there are many laundromats. They use lots of chemical detergents without any waste management and because of that we are identifying a steep decline of the number of fish in the lagoon. So we discussed with the local people about producing a low cost natural soap by themselves. Our aim is not to have a big production connected to the global market but to generate a small circle of economy internally in the island. So, they generate heat from coconut leaves, dry the copra, squeeze the oil, make the soap and use it in daily life. A very primitive economy can be established in this way.
**Maya**: OK, so it’s more a local solution than commerce.

**Long**: One thing that’s interesting is that if you bring young Japanese over, does that make the younger Yap people more interested because they see the value of their culture to the outsiders?

**Ohmae**: The young Japanese work as a mirror for the local people. Looking at the reactions of the Japanese participants when the boys of Yap climb a very high tree with bare hands makes them very confident and proud of themselves. Actually, those reactions are quite important for the local people even for the older people. I believe encountering a different culture can make change. Maybe for the younger fishermen, fishing itself maybe something boring but if they have a mirror from outside, I’m confident that they would have a new dimension in their lives.

**Sugamata**: Could you tell me the actual value of stone money?

**Ohmae**: If my son killed someone I would need to surrender all my stone money in compensation. The stone money is used in ceremonial things such as marriage. Each stone money has a story and there is no digit to evaluate which is higher or lower. It is really symbolic.