

## **Supporting the revitalization of remote islands:**

### **Diversity and community**

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The population is declining and aging on remote islands in Japan, and the number of villages whose survival is at a critical stage is increasing. Meanwhile, there are many islands that have achieved population growth and a youthful population due to the diversification of people's preferences for residential areas, narrowing of the disparity between rural and urban areas in the living and working environment mainly due to development and the spread of ICT, and the government's migration policy. A good example of this is Suwanosejima. The population of Suwanosejima went from 74 people in 2000 to 42 in 2010. However, due to the various initiatives of Toshima village and Suwanosejima, the population increased to 79 people by 2016. Many of these migrants are I-turners (people who relocated from other place than their home town). According to statistical data by Toshima Village Hall, there were 38 migrants from FY2009 to FY2016, of which 31 were I-turners and seven were U-turners (people who temporarily relocated and returned to their hometown). I-turners constituted 81.6% of all migrants. The elderly population percentage also decreased from 29.5% in 2010 to 17.5% in 2016. Population growth and a youthful population are developing at the same time. Let's take a look at the process by which this island attracted I-turners and began to take a step toward revitalization.

Suwanosejima became an uninhabited island following a large volcanic eruption in 1813, and was settled by FUJII Tomiden and others from Amami Oshima nearly 70 years later in the 1880s. In the late 1960s, the formation of communes (autonomously living villages) formed a new islander group. These people were called "Hippies" by outsiders. At the time, the island desperately wanted youth migration to maintain its distribution network by regularly scheduled ships. Upon a request from the island, SAKAKI Nanao, a member of a group called "The Tribe" in Tokyo, called out to his friends and created a commune with an American poet SNYDER Gary and others in 1967. Many youths visited this commune, and they lived an almost self-sufficient communal life without using currency until around 1977 or 1978. Marriages and child-raising among the members forced the development of households, and the commune collapsed. However, five households (as of 2016), including members of the commune, play a central role as an island elder group for Amami-originating festivals such as Arasetsu and Shibasashi held in shrines, as well as the management of local government events and school events. The descendants of the Amami settlers and the islanders of the commune overcame their differences to create communities, passing on the island culture while retaining the Amami culture, to the next generation. They have laid the foundation for the acceptance and retention of I-turners.

Furthermore, the spread of the internet has made it easier for people of various occupations to settle on remote islands. Some guesthouse owners are obtaining customers by using websites. A woman earns income from website creation. There are no shops on the island, but islanders can now obtain products through online shopping, in addition to the limited shops in Kagoshima city that they have used for many years. The number of islanders who obtain various products through the leading Kagoshima city supermarket “Taiyo” and Amazon is increasing. The online supermarket for Taiyo has the same delivery fees regardless of whether the destination is a remote island or Kagoshima city. The gap between cities and remote islands is steadily narrowing in terms of the procurement of supplies. With the narrowing of gaps in logistics and information as a tailwind, veteran I-turners have successfully accepted various migrants. The collaborative relationships of various actors in the area are also of note. The islanders are working hard to accept I-turners in cooperation with government offices and non-profit organizations (NPOs). The NPO Tokara Interface plans and manages island tours for those wishing to move. This NPO breaks away from traditional economic activities that depend on public works projects and searches for independence and self-reliance. They seek to recognize and reconstruct the regional mechanisms, the “connections” in which people and nature, and people and people co-exist and cooperate with each other, with a focus on the “richness” that is unique to this region.

Projects that revitalize the economy and society of remote islands with a declining and aging population are not easy to achieve. However, accepting diverse people and creating new communities while making use of the cultural resources cultivated in the history of remote islands is considered to be one way to revitalize remote islands.



**A set of Jizos, or stone guardian deities of children, showing the diversity of Suwanosejima islanders**