

What are the opportunities for taking a second look at the obvious?

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I think that readers have experienced times when things they took for granted in their daily lives were not the case when seen externally. The same applies to nature; there are many things that we overlook while living in a place, only to see the tremendous value there when looking from different angles.

In early February of 2021, I took a tour to observe wildlife at night in Sumiyo town, Amami city. It was not a major event for me since I often observe wild animals in my research, but this time, I accompanied a colleague on her first night tour. She had never encountered an Amami rabbit, so I was able to experience my earlier days of feeling like a tourist. My colleague, Ms. SEI, who worked with me at the Amami station, International Center for Island Studies, Kagoshima University, brought me back to the feelings of excitement that I had forgotten. She was born and raised in Hirata town in former Naze city (part of Amami city today). She rarely had opportunities to go to Sumiyo town, one of the habitats of the Amami rabbits, at most just passing the town by when going to her grandmother's house in Kakeromajima or going there on a drive.

The reason why we were able to participate in a night tour, to begin with, was because in November 2020, we applied to the "Accommodation / Experience Program Usage Subsidy Program for Islanders" and were fortunate enough to win it. The five municipalities in Amami Oshima conducted the program. Since the number of tourists has decreased due to the influence of the novel coronavirus, the project aims to let islanders experience hotels and sightseeing on the island that they would usually not use. The tours we participated in are usually 7,500 yen, but almost half of the tour was subsidized, and we were able to participate for 3,800 yen.

While traveling from Naze to Santaro-no-Sato (tourist facility) in Sumiyo town, the location of the meeting, I was able to hear many stories from Ms. SEI, such as her expectations of the tour and her feelings about Amami Oshima, where she was born and raised. She lived in Osaka for about three years due to work, but that was far away from the oceans and mountains, and she told me that this was the first time since leaving the island that she felt "how close nature was in Amami." She played all the time in the nature of Amami as a child; however, after becoming an adult, nature was just a landscape to her, and she did not really have any opportunities to directly interact with nature.

We were able to see about seven Amami rabbits during the roughly two and a half hours of the tour. Ms. SEI had an honest impression that she was happy to be able to observe the real Amami rabbit for the first time in her life. She described this tour as having taught her,

through experience, the nature that until then she had just driven by and not properly observed, and that this was a precious experience for her. She had heard about how the Amami rabbit was a precious animal and was, therefore, aware of its value, but it was far removed from her daily life, and she had rarely given it much attention. However, after the tour, she told me that it left a big impression on her, saying that “the nature of Amami is amazing indeed.”

How do the residents of Sumiyo feel about the nature that is so close to them? I have recently conducted interview surveys relating to night tours. During these sessions, I was able to listen to the stories of some of the residents of Sumiyo town. The city road Santaro Line and its surrounding forests, where night tours are currently being conducted, were places of everyday life for the residents of Sumiyo. Sumiyo town is broadly divided between Tojo and Sumiyo, with Santaro Pass as the boundary. The road that crosses this pass is the current city road of the Santaro Line, which was opened as a prefectural road in 1917. This city road served a major role as a road that connected Naze and Setouchi town until the Santaro tunnel and bypass were created in 1989. It was particularly active in 1960s–1970s when the forestry business was in its heyday. The forestry business declined with the passage of time, and the city road Santaro Line was gradually used less often with the creation of the tunnel and bypass.

Two things have been revealed through the interview surveys. The first is that the city road Santaro Line and its surrounding nature has been recognized as a landscape that the residents of Sumiyo town take for granted. To them, the city road Santaro Line is just a path that they can visit at any time, and the Amami rabbit is an animal that lives in the nature near them and which they can go to see at any time. However, the second point is that this proximity is one of the factors that creates a distance between the relationship of the residents with their surroundings. Like that of air, there are no opportunities to recognize the “obvious.” It is known that the Amami rabbit is a precious animal that only exists on Amami Oshima and Tokunoshima, but people have taken their presence for granted so much that there seem to be few people who actively go to see them. Some of the people in Sumiyo town have visited the city road, Santaro Line, to show children and grandchildren who have returned to the island, as well as acquaintances who have come from outside the island to see the Amami rabbit. It seems that the knowledge that the precious treasures are buried there is too apparent and suppresses the act of seeing the real thing—despite there being a sense of awe in doing so.

I introduced my personal experience and examples of specific areas in this article. However, I think that the content shown here would apply to anybody in the world. Finally, I would like to focus on Amami and propose my thoughts. What is needed for the people of Amami to become aware of the obvious nature of their respective regions, and to take a second look at their relationship with nature?

Amami will steadily change in the coming years, including the World Natural Heritage Site status that they are aiming to register themselves for this year (as of 26th July 2021 Amami was registered as the World Natural Heritage Site). The people of Amami need to take a second look at themselves properly and continue to have a relationship with nature. It is

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only when the people of Amami become aware of the value of nature and continue to have a relationship with it that they can continue to leave behind to future generations a valuable form of nature, which is also the purposes of the World Natural Heritage. Phrases like “World Natural Heritage” and “Protection” are often heard in recent years, but there may be some who feel like these terms “don’t quite click,” or are “far removed from your lives.” However, I would hope that you would be more aware of the extraordinary nature of Amami by taking an interest in the nature around you, even the trivial elements, and reconsider how the obvious is actually of global value.



The Amami rabbit