





Chapter 10

Yoron Health Villa

Yoron Island

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Yoron Island, the southernmost island of the Satsunan Islands, has a population of about 6,000 and an area of 20.49 square kilometers. The entire island forms the town of Yoron. The islanders there refer to their island as "Yunnu."

Yoron is a flat island made of uplifted coral reef. Viewed from the sky, it is an angelfish-shaped island surrounded by growths of coral reef. Yoron is extolled as "a dazzling pearl afloat the Pacific seas." Until Okinawa was returned to Japan, Yoron was popularly known as Japan's southernmost island. About eighty thousand tourists a year come to see its pure white sandy beaches and emerald green waters. Yoron is being developed as a resort island. In fact, the islanders declared that their island is the Panauru Kingdom, which means "kingdom of flowers and corals," and entered a sister pact with Mykonos Island of Greece.

The first time I visited Yoron was twenty years ago when the island was in the limelight as a sightseeing spot. The scenery was exactly the image that most Japanese have of an island in the south Pacific and I was able to experience the total sensation of the southern island. In those days, not many facilities had been set up for sightseeing on the island. Young people thronged the island just for the beautiful ocean.

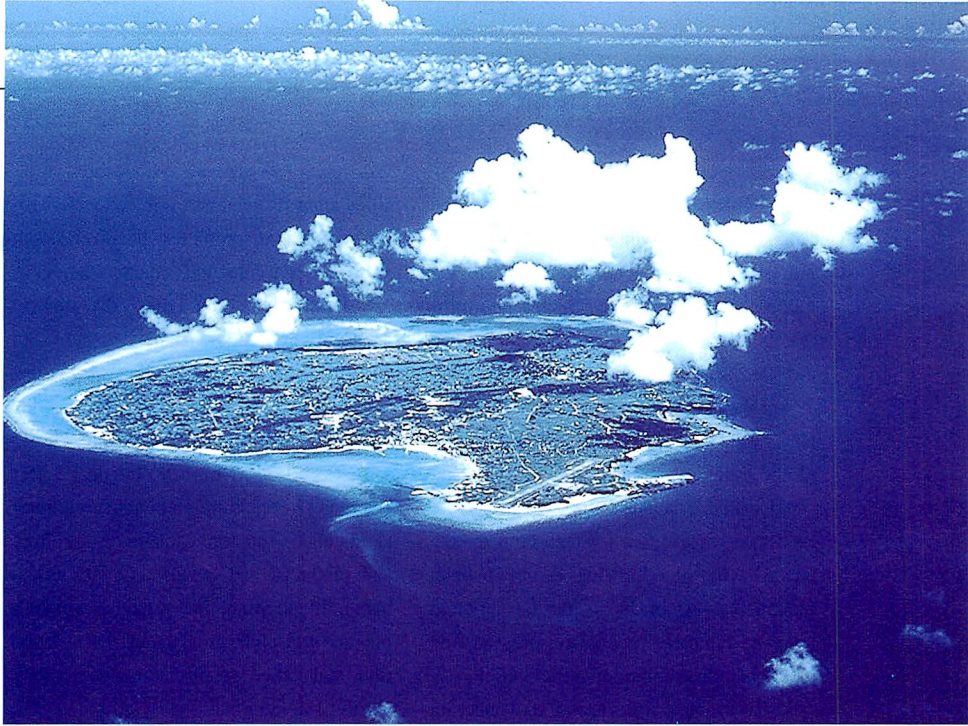
Tourism is still an important industry of the island today. The islanders are making a diversity of endeavors to promote tourism that meets the needs of the tourist.

For example, tourism on the island used to be focussed on summer but they are expanding the scope to encompass the whole year. They are creating a townscape and scenery that befits the island's tourism and are conducting publicity campaigns to attract more visitors.

Last year, I visited Yoron again and had the opportunity to meet medical practitioner Dr. Seiji Kokawa. At that time, I learned more about a group of non-governmental facilities called the Yoron Health Villa. The facilities operate jointly with the objective of using the climate and natural environment of Yoron for promoting health. I have asked Dr. Kokawa to introduce the details of regional revitalization through the activities of the Yoron Health Villa in this chapter.

The Yoron Health Villa conducts a great diversity of activities for regional development but activities involving medical services and attention to primary health care are especially unique features (Primary health care is the prevention of sickness in people through health improvement, inoculation, improved environmental sanitation, and so on.).

Yoron was still as beautiful as it was twenty years ago. I was impressed with the degree of regional development and vitality of the Yoron Health Villa members. According to data for the Yoron Town Development Plan, the service industry is the industry with the highest net production ratio in the town of Yoron. It is followed by construction, agriculture, wholesale &



Aerial view of Yoron Island

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retail business and banking & insurance.

About one third of the population of six thousand is concentrated in the Chabana area. The Higashi and Nama areas each form a medium-scale community. And the other areas form small-scale communities throughout the whole island. The population of every community has been decreasing in recent years. Uniform development throughout the entire island is considered the main challenge facing Yoron.

The 4th Ten Year Plan of Yoron has

been mapped out as a specific plan that shows the direction that the town of Yoron should take for the ten-year period starting in 2001. The plan also indicates the goals and the way to reach the goals. It has been decided that the officials and the civilians will unite to execute the plan with the underlying concept of "unique island development with radiant people and natural environment." (Shinichi Noda)

Regional Revitalization Activities

The effect of the bubble economy was deeply felt even in this distant remote southern island of Kagoshima Prefecture. Its vestiges can be seen in the shutdown

stores in the shopping districts, in the closed down inns interspersed throughout the island, and in Yurigahama where the modern buildings were erected but ultimately found no use. The scenery is like the peaceful field after a gruesome battle.

I was stunned to hear that the price of land went for 700,000 yen per *tsubo* (3.306 square meters) on the shopping street called Chabana-Ginza Street. That is an astronomical price for land on a remote island. After the bursting of the bubble, like in the rest of Japan, the unsupported load of Japanese economy pressed the island administration down into deficit.

Everyone on the island is wondering what happened to the money that the overflow of tourists used to bring to the island. And still worse, with an aging society and a decreasing birthrate, the island population is gradually diminishing, and everyone on the island is now feeling uneasy about the future.

But a new trend is gradually emerging with the changing times. The new trend is not the conventional approach that is apt to become a plan aiming for government-subsidized regional revitalization centered on some public utility. It is a trend in which the local inhabitants themselves develop the region with their own abilities in their own unique ways. The trend is changing the direction of our lifestyles and can be considered a blessing brought on by the new era.

Examples of the trend are the Yoron Health Villa, the Yoron Folk Villa and the Yoron Greek Villa. The Yoron Health

Villa aims to actualize our conception of an island that promotes health through Yoron's environmental characteristics as an island. The Yoron Folk Villa aims to create a community that breathes life into Yoron's traditional products, history, language and so on. And the Yoron Greek Villa aims to deepen Yoron's relationship with Mykonos, which is Yoron's sister island in Greece, through human communication and substantial exchanges of culture and products, and create a Greek atmosphere. In addition, the regional women's bureau, 4-H club, cross-industrial association and other groups are also actively involved in the trend.

Trying to put order to all of the separate activities, the members on the front line have held frequent meetings to review the citizen-based town planning with the ten-year regional development plan. In addition to four conferences requested from the regular town authorities, extra meetings were held almost every week from eight o'clock in the evening to midnight for more thorough discussions. The plan received approval of the Yoron town assembly and has become official. I will present a synopsis of the results at the end of this chapter.

It is an often repeated claim, but through the many review meetings, I became even more convinced that regional revitalization is brought on by the people of the region. Having accepted the role of the responsible person, I was surprised that so many people in Yoron had become ac-

tive in the regional revitalization and I am deeply grateful for the very favorable situation. Regional revitalization is not something that comes from Tokyo or some other

Concept of Yoron Health Villa

In a turn of fortune's wheel, in 1988, I was assigned to the Yoron Town Municipal Clinic. I call myself a primary care doctor who practices medical treatment for the whole person. As the characteristics of the region are important elements of primary care, a remote island like Yoron is the ideal location for my practice because it is a clear-cut medical care zone.

The culture and customs on Yoron are unique. Although Yoron is part of Kagoshima Prefecture, it is five hundred kilometers away from the prefectural government offices. And due to its geographic position, it has received long years of influence by the Ryukyu dynasty. Moreover, although much of its natural environment has been destroyed, its splendid scenery has never stopped enchanting its numerous visitors.

Conducting medical treatment on Yoron convinced me that the essence of sickness is in the daily life, climate and surroundings of the sick person, and for many people, the atmosphere of a peculiar region has a healing effect. Although Yoron has a modest population of only six

place. It comes from the people living in the region.

thousand-odd people, a hundred and twenty of them are oldsters over ninety years old, many of whom are still actively working.

The Remote Islands Development Division of the Regional Development Bureau of the National Land Agency gave the name "island therapy" to health building through utilization of an island's peculiar characteristics. It defines the characteristics of island therapy as follows:

- 1) Being isolated, small and separated by an expanse of ocean, the island provides an unordinary environment that is different from urban living environments. The island's environment befits health recuperation and is ideal for a change of air and scenery.
- 2) An abundance of lush natural environment remains on the island and development can be expected for marine activities and recreation such as leisure walks, hiking, cycling and sea bathing.
- 3) A unique culture has developed on the island since ancient times and a kind of traditional human relationship and exchange that the urbanites are on the verge of forgetting still thrives on Yoron today. A stay on the island fosters a healthy spirit and heals a tired mind.

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- 4) The marine and agricultural products of the island are healthy foods.
 - 5) Being an island surrounded by beautiful ocean, its atmosphere provides a thalassotherapeutic effect anywhere.

Considering size, shape, climate and culture, Yoron is indeed the ideal place for island therapy.

I had already been picturing the concept of the Yoron Health Villa in my mind before I was assigned to the Yoron Town Municipal Clinic. At that time, the Yoron Pricia Resort also had ideas about becoming a place for health recuperation and made a request to me for cooperation with the medical treatment aspects of their plan. I consented. However, for some reason, their activities for such health recuperation came to an end.

Activities of Yoron Health Villa

The Yoron Health Villa officially opened in 1995. As I mentioned earlier, I had been thinking of the plan for ten years, but it was only after I moved my Panauru Clinic to the natural environment of the Nama area that I began substantial activities.

At that time, the person who leased the land to me had been developing his idea of producing healthy food and tropical

But the idea never left me. I had actually started activities for the Yoron Health Villa before the announcement of the island therapy concept so I heartily agreed with the concept when it was announced. I put the existing facilities into action and decided to focus on tourism for medical treatment in a wide-ranging way.

The World Health Organization defines health as the state of physical, mental and social well-being, but I would like to add the state of spiritual well-being, which I mentioned earlier. I believe that a good spiritual state is the state in which you are earnestly seeking the life goal that was meant for you. At the Yoron Health Villa, we want to promote activities aiming to foster such a healthy state.

fruit using organic farming and just started harvesting the tropical fruit. He launched the Shalon Farm, joined the Yoron Health Villa, and became the nucleus of the group's food and health operations, which include hortitherapy.

The newly constructed Panauru Clinic is a total timber construction using large processed cross sections. I gave it an original structure in which space for building health occupies half of the facility.

Having made the medical science of primary health care the mainstay of the clinic, I decided to establish day clinics for the elderly. I also decided to regularly hold

exercise programs for health, conducting exercises such as walking, stretching and rhythmic movements. And considering the severity of environmental effects on the health, I decided to hold forums twice a year with the theme of environmental effects on the health. I also worked on cultivating kenafs, which are said to be gentle on the environment.

Exactly when I arrived to Yoron, a man who had been requested to come up with specialty products succeeded in developing a cuisine of buckwheat noodles in soup with an alga-like seaweed called *mozuku* (*Nemacystus decipiens*) and marketed it as health food. He also worked on salt making, which had been an ongoing task, and came up with natural salt with the brand name "Jinen." The natural salt and traditional millet vinegar with the brand name "Ougonsu" have come to play an important role in the Yoron Health Villa.

I also decided to get the cooperation of the Yoron Village Resort, Rakuen Inn and the Yoron Pricia Resort, which are nearby, as lodging facilities to accommodate people coming to recuperate for a long period. In addition, as ceramic art workshops, along with Gallery Kai, a Yoron-yaki *kamamoto* pottery workshop, a Yunnu *adouru-yaki* pottery workshop and a handicraft workshop have joined the Yoron Health Villa. And as an easy-going meeting place, a restaurant-tavern called "Hyoukin" has also joined.

I have drawn up simple statutes, which are the business operation rules. In

the statutes, Yoron Health Villa is defined as a group of independent enterprises that operate jointly and aim for total health building. The annual dues are five thousand yen for proprietors and one thousand yen for general members. For details, visit the Yoron Health Villa website <http://www.yoron.or.jp>

An organization of this form had never been established on Yoron before, so when I registered the Yoron Health Villa in the Yoron Tourism Cooperation, the other organizations couldn't understand what the villa was about. However, the number of people coming for long periods of recuperation has been increasing in winter lately so they are finally starting to understand that the Yoron Health Villa is contributing to tourism after all.

The regular monthly walk meet started by the Yoron Health Villa has now evolved into the Yoron Walkers Society with an office at the Yoron Tourism Cooperation. The walking course circles the island. It is divided into five segments, each with a different name. I have had pamphlets made that teach anyone how to walk the course throughout the year. Every November, the Yoron Panauru Walk attracts over two hundred participants from all over Japan every year. This year's meet will be the tenth.

Traditional thin and middle-sized *samisens* are a vital part of the lifestyle on Yoron. Until recently, men and women of the island used to form relationships through musical exchanges using the

samisens. It used to be common on moonlit nights for a man to be plucking away on his samisen as he approached the home of a woman he liked. Upon hearing the sound of the samisen, the woman, waiting eagerly, would go out to meet the man and accompany him on a visit to the beach.

I hold samisen workshops using Yoron's traditional samisens as tools for healing. Most people can learn one or two numbers during a one-month stay. The workshops also serve as a means to keep the tradition alive by having the children of the island also participate.

I am now introducing some Yoron Health Villa houses that I had constructed for people who move to the island to reside permanently. The presence of new permanent residents will add to the regional revitalization and increase cultural exchanges. And the increase in population will naturally add liveliness to the region.

It is a peculiar example but I happened to meet a Buddhist priest of the Nichiren sect who wanted to propagate Buddhism on Yoron, which has never been subjected to Buddhist propagation. He also decided to move into the island. I listen to his sermons about care of the mind and heart from time to time.

For regional exchange, I started an exchange program with the town of Niikappu in Hokkaido. In the program, elementary school pupils of Yoron and Niikappu change places. For starters, from January 1st to the 7th last year in 2000, I took four Yoron pupils to Niikappu to expe-

rience the Hokkaido winter. The Yoron children stayed at the homes of pupils of Taiyo Elementary School and gained very valuable experiences, seeing the dairy farms, going skiing, and so on.

And at the end of July, eight pupils from Niikappu came to Yoron to experience the summer here. Unfortunately, a typhoon struck the island just after the pupils arrived but they were still able to enjoy swimming in the ocean during the calm intervals. And this year in January, three Yoron pupils went to Hokkaido. The money for the trip is partially supplied by the pupils themselves, but most of it comes from bazaars and donations.

A little while ago, on the Yoron Health Villa website, which was established a few years ago, I started a mailing list to enable people inside and outside the island to participate. About a hundred people have already joined through the mailing list and a lively exchange of all sorts of information is taking place. This new network is opening even more doors.

The Internet has done away with the obstacles of time and distance so regular exchange can now be made with the USA, Hong Kong, India, or anyplace else around the globe, not to mention Japan. Online members who visit the island get to actually meet some of the people they had been communicating with via the Internet.

As a new operation, the Yoron Health Villa is recruiting helping hands to harvest millet and has started an exchange between farming households and young men from



Yoron Panauru Walk

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big cities. This year five young men were selected from fifteen applicants. They all tackled the work in high gear and earned an excellent reputation.

As a recent experiment, to make use of natural energy, a so-called hybrid type of generator powered by both sunlight and wind has been under installation on the site of the Pricia Resort. I would like the Yoron Health Villa to continue aiming to promote Yoron's image as the ideal place for overall health building. Yoron's image should be that of an island of clean energy that is gentle to the environment, an island that supplies healthy food, and an island that places high priority on health and the environment.

Future Prospects

Based on the 4th Ten Year Plan of Yoron, which I outlined earlier, I would like to introduce the future prospects for here on as part of Yoron's plans for the



Panauru Clinic, where the office for Yoron Health Villa is located

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Health exercise room inside Panauru Clinic

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future. The direction for the Yoron Health Villa to take is incorporated in the plan.

The main underlying concept is unique island development. Unique island development means development that turns Yoron into a place with the special feature of having that which is only found on

Yoron and that which can only be done on Yoron. It also turns Yoron into a place to take pride in and a place that is second to no other region. To bring out Yoron's unique atmosphere, we must have a solid understanding of the natural resources and culture of the region and bring in new aspects while being careful not to destroy traditional aspects.

Here is the basic plan:

- 1) Developing unique people
- 2) Developing unique industries
- 3) Developing a unique town

A region cannot be revitalized without people. From here on, the personnel to revitalize the region must be trained. Not to mention the often-talked about "outsiders, zealots and youth," a good balance of personnel is needed for overall development. (It is often said that outsiders, zealots and youth are vital for successful regional development. Outsiders see opportunities that local people are prone to overlook. Zealots put their hearts and souls into the task. And youth have vigor. Moreover, none of the three types harbor fear of failure.)

I have adopted the following themes as the specific project:

- 1) To create the think tanks that sustain the island, a Yunnu citizen-based town-planning college will be established and a citizen-based town-planning committee will be formed. For the town-planning college, one year will be set for preparing an official office and

curriculum. Graduation will be in one-year units. After graduating, the graduates will become leaders at the actual sites under development. The town-planning committee will basically consist of the review meeting members along with new qualified persons. The committee will promote the 10-year plan and monitor its progress.

- 2) As the plan for the construction of the living museum, the following will be promoted:

- The Yunnu Eco-museum plan,
- Town-planning for exchange with Greece,
- The plan to create the "Yoron" brand name,
- The establishment of a center that supports the development of Yoron specialty products,
- Operations to make silk abaca cloth a specialty product.

The living museum to be called Yunnu Eco-museum will not be a conventional theme park or a facility that merely preserves items of interest. It will be an actually functioning institution that lets the visitors experience Yoron's culture and tradition. The content of exchange with Greece will be deepened both personally and commercially. Products unique to Yoron are still too few so the people involved will put in a united effort and developing more of them. And for that, a center open 24 hours a day will be established. Abaca cloth, which has a long history, will

be further developed as a new textile combined with silk. Through that, the know-how for producing abaca cloth and Oshima pongees will not be forgotten.

3) As the plan to create an island of information, the following will be promoted:

- Preparation and maintenance of an information infrastructure,
- Education involving the retrieval and release of information,
- The bringing about of a software industry.

Aid from the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications has already been approved for these operations. Revolving around Yoron Junior High School, information education that makes full use of the Internet has begun. The Yoron concept through broadband utilizing ASDL and fiber optic cable has also begun.

4) As the plan for Yunnu interminglement exchange, operations will unfold for the following:

- Economic exchange with Greece,
- Yunnu cultural exchange,
- Health building exchange.

We are already receiving a great deal of support from JETRO (Japan External Trade Organization) for the economic exchange.

5) To create an island with a favorable environment, the following will be promoted:

- Mapping out of the general plan for environment,
- Adoption and utilization of new

energy sources,

- Yoron's ocean regeneration project,
- Environmental studies.

While environmental disruption is a global problem, for Yoron, it is also a local problem concerning the way to protect the natural environment. The hope that the beautiful ocean of Yoron will be preserved forever is harbored not only by the islanders, but also by the many Yoron partisans throughout Japan. I began a reef check as an examination into the state of the ocean water around Yoron. I plan to gather the data from the checks for the coming ten years. The installation program for a wind energy conversion system for natural energy use is progressing well.

Officials and civilians will unite to execute the projects. When Yoron becomes an island that anyone would like to live on, and when it becomes an island that the islanders take pride in, it will truly be a dazzling pearl afloat the Pacific seas. On behalf of the Yoron Health Villa, I would like to further aim to make Yoron a self-sustaining island and to turn the Nama area, which is tentatively named "Nama Valley," into a region of agriculture and IT. I plan to work on promoting the increase of permanent residents and to foster and assemble more personnel from both inside and outside the island. (Seiji Kokawa)