

In Search of the Blue Bird. What is that you've been longing for?

Part 3: Improvement of agricultural local life and growth of local industries

“Uncle, can you give me your blue bird?”

“Sure. But it cannot bear the boisterous life of the lay world, and I cannot guarantee nothing would happen then.”

In Japan, due to the country's steep topography, the acreage of land available for farming is inevitably small, leading to higher production costs. On the other hand, many other countries capable of mono-cultural cultivation on large acreages of farmland are producing huge quantities of agricultural products and exporting them at low costs. Japanese consumers have opted for such imported products because of their cheap prices. However, thanks to the increasing environmental and health concerns in recent years, the consumers are seeking “safe” products rather than merely “cheap” ones. Foreseeing such change in the consumer's attitude, in a farming area in Japan some people are trying to promote their locality as well as the health of the local people by introducing “organic farming” to raise additional values to their agricultural products.



An earlier mayor of Aya, a town known for its forestry industry, apparently surprised the local people by objecting to the felling of trees. Aya is a small town located in central Miyazaki Prefecture, with a population of some 7,000. In this agricultural town with 30% of its residents engaged in farming today, “natural ecosystem agriculture” is being promoted under the initiative of the town's authorities. Earlier, in Aya, horticultural therapy was started following the promotion of small organic farms for the sake of the health improvement of the local people, especially senior residents. This activity has expanded since then and led to the establishment of an organic farming development centre, the development of the town's original standards for certifying organic agricultural products, the construction of an organic compost plant, and the expansion of the marketing of organic products, etc. Moreover, apart from organic farming, Aya is undertaking other town promotion schemes using natural resources, such as tourism development with the local natural broad-leaf forests as an attraction, wood carving, textile dyeing, brewing and so on. Consequently Aya's town promotion, by combining organic farming with other schemes, is known widely throughout the country.

The compost plant produces organic composts using household waste, and a number of farms in and around Aya display certificates of organic farming approved by the town. In the fields green manure mixed farming of sesbania and milk vetches is practiced, while ducks contribute to weeding in the paddy fields. It is said that already 70% of the town's farmers are practicing organic farming. On the other hand, the streets of Aya are kept neat and there stand many signboards indicating key facilities of the town. People come to fetch drinking water from a pond next to the stalls in the centre of the town which sell organic products and local foodstuff. Such scenery of the town's daily life makes us bystanders sense some sort of satisfaction which cannot be felt in urban cities.

Thus, Aya has made great efforts for rural agricultural development by creating additional values to agricultural products, foreseeing consumers' needs and expanding its own marketing routes / methods. This has been achieved by making full use of the natural environment and other unique characteristics of the locality, and by creating a system to help improve the local people's lifestyle. This challenge of Aya Town can be referred to as one example of positive rural development whether in or outside Japan.

The influx of cheap agricultural products from overseas may be spoiling the prospect of lifestyle improvement in farming areas, leaving many farmlands unattended and deserted and decreasing the natural self-supporting and nurturing capacity of farmlands and forestry areas. We must seriously question the plausibility of the idea that only a supremacist monetary economy and higher economic efficiency with maximum productivity can bring happiness to people.



Stalls selling organic products



Paddy field certified for organic farming



Spring in central Aya (where local people come and fetch drinking water)