

From the frontline of environmental education <Part 2>

Yatsuhigata Nature Observation Center

On Yatsuhigata

Yatsuhigata is a 40-ha tidal flat in Narashino City, Chiba Prefecture. Most of the tidal flats in the Chiba portion of the Tokyo Bay were reclaimed one after another during the 1960s and 70s. They were converted into industrial and residential areas. However, as Yatsuhigata was on the national government's land, it escaped reclamation. As a result, Yatsuhigata provides scarce habitats for migratory shorebirds that visit Tokyo Bay. For these very good reasons it was designated a Ramsar site in 1993, under the Ramsar Convention, thereby endorsing its international significance as a wetland site of Global Importance.

Nature Observation Center

The Yatsuhigata Nature Observation Center (in this article; 'the Center') is an observation and enjoy and learning place about the Yatsuhigata and the migratory birds that fly in to the tidal flats. It is a visitor center aiming to protect the precious tidal flats that are remaining in cities everywhere that are facing urban development in coastal areas of high ecological and biodiversity importance as well as cultural and recreational significance. Here, at the Center, there are telescopes, educational resources and bird books for bird watching and guiding is offered by knowledgeable and caring rangers. In the lecture room, video shows and lectures on birds are organized. During weekends, events such as bird watching, and benthic life form and plankton watching events are also organized. The emphasis in the Center's 'exhibit corner' is on fun for children and adults encouraging all ages to learn about birds through interesting activities.

Environmental Education at the Center

At the Center, a variety of environmental education programs are offered targeting primary, secondary and high school students and citizens' groups such as wildlife and nature enthusiasts. For these activities, not only rangers but also many individual and group volunteers are involved providing support and a sense of community. Through citizens' participation as volunteers in the Center's activities, opportunities for people to know about tidal flats are increased, and their

understanding about tidal flats and ecosystems is enhanced and enriched. This is expected to lead to the promotion of tidal flat protection actions by the general public, here and elsewhere.

Junior Ranger System

One unique and practical activity of the Center's environmental education programs is the junior ranger system. This offers children above the primary's 3rd grade, or older, opportunities to obtain certificates and commemorative badges as they clear different levels of challenges from Step 1 to Step 3. For Step 1 and 2, children need to participate in active programs such as 'crab fishing' and 'tidal flat creature observation'. For Step 3, children are expected to participate in bird count exercises at the tidal flats (to understand the ecological working of tidal flats and the neighbors they have here) and conduct clean ups (to protect the important environments they are in charge of and are enjoying). In addition, they need to assist in the organization of the Center's events and spread the word about junior rangers' activities (and communicate to young and old about the importance of tidal flats); the activity and duty lasts throughout the year and they become junior rangers by learning to communicate, deliver information and engage each other. In this way, they grow to be junior rangers through information dispatch and exchange activities between themselves and other people interested in conservation.

Through the step system program, children come frequently to the Center as 'repeaters' and acquire a wider range of knowledge through various activities. This in turn nurtures their interests in, and consciousness of the need to protect tidal flats. Furthermore, proactive actions such as communicating information and assisting event organizations can promote enhancement of their understanding and engagements in concrete actions. They are involved in the process of environmental education. Not just listening to it passively as is sometimes the case in conventional environmental education programs. This proactive method is very effective in environmental education and is worth further consideration at, and beyond, the Center.



Main entrance of the Yatsuhigata Nature Observation Center



Telescopes for bird watching



Bird sculpture made by volunteers