



KIWC newsletter

- Kushiro Shitsugen commemorates the 30th anniversary of being inscribed as a registered wetland under the Ramsar Convention in 2010-

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Winter Eco-tour 2010 Held to Mark World Wetlands Day

To mark this year's World Wetlands Day (every February 2nd), the "Winter Eco-tour 2010" was held for local residents on January 31, 2010. A total of 26 people, including staff members as well as tour participants, visited Lake Akan, which is one of the Ramsar sites in the Kushiro region, and enjoyed walking in the lakeside forests and on the frozen lake.

Lake Akan, 420 meters above sea level, is a caldera lake located in Akan National Park. Although this area is especially cold in Hokkaido, participants enjoyed following in the footprints of Ezo Red Squirrels and Ezo Shika Deer or observing plants perish in winter, etc. by making their way through the knee-deep snow. Despite the cold bitter midwinter, there was no snow around Bokke (mud volcano) near a promenade along the lake due to underground heat, and the participants were surprised at the warm ground and growing fresh moss.

After the stroll, they moved to a municipal multipurpose facility, "Marimu-kan Hall", which utilizes heat from hot spring water as a heater, and enjoyed bingo games featuring "what one found on the lakeside."

The theme of World Wetlands Day in 2010 is "biodiversity and climate change in wetlands". In light of deteriorating environment of wetlands, which have rich biodiversity, due to recent climate change and impact of human activities, we are calling for a "sympathy" to conserve wetlands. This tour was a good opportunity to ponder the theme together because Lake Akan is surrounded by rich environment such as rivers, forests, volcanoes, etc., and is inhabited by many valuable animals and plants including marimo.



Participation in Environmental Conservation Events

A variety of events aiming for promoting conservation of environments including wetlands were held in 2009. KIWC participated in these events to introduce wetlands in the Kushiro region and their activities for conservation through exhibition booths.

Eco Life Fair 2009 "Exhibition of Blessings of Wetlands – Tourism and Local Products in Ramsar Site" (hosted by the Ministry of the Environment)

This fair was held by the Ministry of the Environment at Yoyogi Park, Tokyo on June 6 and 7, 2009. At the booth named "Exhibition of Blessings of Wetlands – Tourism and Local Products in Ramsar Site" on a corner of the site, which was co-hosted by the Meeting of Japanese Municipalities Involved with Wetlands Designated under the Ramsar Convention and other organizations, KIWC also exhibited and distributed posters, leaflets, environmental education kits, etc. to introduce nature, tourism and conservation activities in designated wetlands in the Kushiro region.

Kushiro Eco Fair 2009 in Yugakukan (hosted by Kushiro Eco Fair 2009 Executive Committee)

This fair was held at Kushiro Children's Museum Kodomo Yugakukan on June 6 and 7, 2009, and many citizens including children and their parents visited exhibition booths run by a local environmental group and enjoyed craft experiences. As a member of the Working Group on Action Plan for Nature Restoration Promotion of Kushiro-shitsugen Nature Restoration Council, KIWC participated in this fair and exhibited kits for making "paper planes in the shape of red-crowned cranes/ whooper swans".

Wagamachi Festa 2009 (hosted by Kushiro City and Kushiro Eco Fair Executive Committee)

This festival was held at the Kushiro Tourism and International Relations Center on September 26, 2009. There were exhibition booths by environmental groups and voluntary organizations, and many events such as a karuta game featuring the environment, a lecture, and a mini concert were also held. Many citizens from children to the elderly visited there.

KIWC set up an experience corner for making "paper planes in the shape of red-crowned cranes/ whooper swans", displayed posters for introducing their activities, and hand-made quilt goods made by citizens living in Hunter Estuary Wetlands in Australia, which has a sister relationship with our wetlands.





Activities of the KIWC Technical Committee

With the theme of FY2007 to FY2009 “Alien Species Affecting Wetland Ecosystems”, the KIWC Technical Committee, which is composed of 9 specialists in wetlands and ecosystems, has conducted investigations and public awareness activities on alien species seen in the Kushiro region.

Mink Research

In FY2009, the last year of research study activities on “Alien Species Affecting Wetland Ecosystems”, we focused on American mink from North America (invasive alien species), and conducted a questionnaire survey from May to November to grasp inhabiting situation of mink in Wetlands designated under the Ramsar Convention (Kushiro-shitsugen Wetland, Lake Akkeshi, Bekambeushi Wetland, Kiritappu Wetland and Lake Akan) and their surrounding areas, and to collect information on mink farms which dotted the surrounding area before.

We distributed 479 questionnaires to nature conservation groups, wildlife conservation officers, tourist agencies, etc. and received 221 responses, which included 472 cases from witnesses. (response rate was about 46%.)

What We Found in This Research

From distribution of sighting spots or situations of sighting, we found out that minks are living in almost every region of the riverside of Kushiro-shitsugen Wetland and Bekambeushi Wetland, and around the Lake Akan, and have deep relations with a variety of creatures (such as small animals that serve as prey) as a part of the ecosystem in the region.

[Recognition degree of mink]

These questionnaire results showed that about 80% of respondents had an opportunity to visit the surveyed wetlands for nature observation, fishing, or on business, and furthermore, nearly 80% of respondents could picture the shape of a mink, or knew it well. In addition, 60% of respondents said they had seen wild minks, and the result revealed that minks are a relatively familiar creature for people who are involved with Ramsar sites in the Kushiro region.

[Eyewitness reports of mink]

According to the result of the questionnaires, minks were witnessed especially while they were swimming in a river or eating a meal. Especially, many people witnessed minks eating signal crayfish, which are designated as an invasive alien species. In addition, some cases, in which minks were eating fish or snakes, chasing baby mallards or eating grey herons bigger than themselves, were also reported.

Some people witnessed dead minks. The most common causes of death were traffic accidents and drowning, and they were found on roadsides of busy streets, in traps for fish, shrimp or crawfish.

[Damage from minks]

Not only eyewitness information but reports on damage to the fishing industry were also sent from local salmon hatcheries, fish farms and fisheries cooperatives. Some cases reported that minks ate fish in fish tanks or ripped fishing nets. There was also a case of minks attacking chicken in a poultry house.



Ramsar Sites in the Kushiro Region and Minks

The Kushiro region is in a rich natural environment where there are many rivers and lakes. Especially, Kushiro-shitsugen Wetland, Lake Akan, Lake Akkeshi, Bekambeushi Wetland and Kiritappu Wetland, where wild plants and animals including rare species such as red-crowned crane and Japanese huchen are living, are treasure houses of wild fauna and flora and are internationally-registered as important wetlands under the Ramsar Convention.

The Kushiro region is a good place for minks to live in because of its cool climate similar to the one of their original country, North America, and abundant food.

The extinction of mustelid Japanese River Otters, which had had bigger body than minks and used to live in the waterfront area and eat fish and small animals, was also a favorable condition for minks. There is concern that if minks, having the capability of hunting prey animals both in water and on land, and high fertility, invade in the region, they may heavily affect the ecosystem by eating all creatures including threatened species such as baby red-crowned cranes and Japanese indigenous crayfish, or by taking dens of other animals whose food habits and behavior are similar to those of minks (mustelid animals etc.)



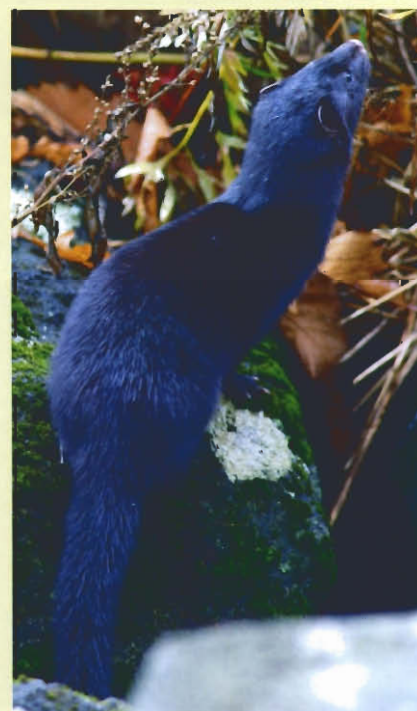
American Mink (*Mustela vison*)

The American mink is the Mustelidae family coming from North America (Carnivora Order). Their body is long and slim with short legs and a slender tail.

They prefer the shore of a river or lake and sea coast, and make dens under trees or rocks. They can catch not only small birds and rats but also fish, frogs, crawfish, etc. making use of their outstanding swimming ability.

Because of their tough and beautiful fur, many minks were bred, and new varieties with various hair colors were produced for fur goods.

Though they originally hadn't existed in Japan, they were imported and raised at farms for fur production, then some of them, which escaped or were abandoned, are now living in the wild in Hokkaido, Nagano, etc.



(Photo: Yoshimitsu Jin)

Holding of a Debriefing Session on Mink Research

A debriefing session on mink research entitled "Minks and Alien Species in Kushiro Region" was held on March 27, 2010 at the Kushiro Lifelong Learning Center under the auspices of KIWC Technical Committee. About 80 people, including those who answered a questionnaire, nature-loving folks who take an interest in wetlands and other related parties, attended the session.

In the session, an overview of the "investigation on the state of the inhabitation of minks around Ramsar sites in the Kushiro region" implemented in 2009 was introduced, then Atsushi Kawahara, a member of the committee and president of the Kiritappu Wetland Center, explained the current state of introduced mustelid species including minks.

Next, with Hisashi Shinsho, the senior technical member of the committee, leading the session, we exchanged opinions with participants on how to get along with alien species including minks in the region in the light of the results of the survey. Tatsuichi Tsujii, chairman of the committee and president of the Hokkaido Environment Foundation, offered comments, and participants also expressed their opinions vigorously.

At the site, some items such as photos of minks provided during the survey, stuffed mustelid animals including minks and mink fur goods, were exhibited and attracted attention from participants.



Issuance of Report on Activities of the Technical Committee and Leaflets of Minks



The technical committee issued a research survey reports on March 2010 featuring their activities from FY2007 to FY2009 on "Alien Species Affecting Wetland Ecosystems". Other than the detail reports on "investigation on the state of the inhabitation of minks around Ramsar sites in the Kushiro region" conducted in 2009, each member wrote on the current situation of typical alien species in wetlands in the Kushiro region and its problems, measures, etc. (only in Japanese). We distributed it to nature conservation groups and related administrative agencies, and will also provide to people who want it for free (shipping costs extra).

In addition, another a leaflet on minks in the Kushiro region, which was based on the achievement of the investigation, was also issued (only in Japanese). The leaflet was created for general readers with many illustrations and pictures so that it can be used at schools or events for children as material to consider problems with alien species such as the lifestyles and distribution of minks, invasion into the Kushiro region and its background, damage situations, etc. It is distributed for free to related organizations and also utilized at environmental events etc. as educational material.

Co-hosting of Environmental Seminar "Environmental Policy and Measures against Climate Change of the EU"

The seminar on Environmental Policy and Measures against Climate Change of the EU, which was hosted by the Kushiro Nature Conservation Office of the Ministry of the Environment and KIWC, was held on February 19, 2010 at the Kushiro Tourism and International Relations Center. In this seminar, Ms. Julie Raynal, who is the first secretary of the Delegation of the European Union to Japan, spoke on environmental policy conducted at the initiative of the EU in European countries where measures against global warming are advanced.

Ms. Raynal studied at the faculty of law of Nice Sophia Antipolis University and Graduate School of Sorbonne University, and has been working as a legal expert of the EU, and also been engaged in international negotiations on climate change and measures for European climate change.

This time, she explained to general audience comprehensively about the current situation of the environmental policy of the EU, climate change, biodiversity, waste disposal policy, contents of international conference, etc., and also emphasized the significance of conserving forests and wetlands as a measure against global warming.



Ramsar Sites in Japan, Series 18 - Sarobetsu Mire (Hokkaido) -

Sarobetsu mire, which is located in northern part of Hokkaido, lies in Wakkanai City, Toyotomi Town and Horonobe Town, and its vast moor with grand Mt. Rishiri in the background is the largest high moor in low-lying land in Japan. Centering on the high moor area mainly composed of sphagnum, intermediate and low moors are expanding, and the Sarobetsu River, which is the root of the name "Sarobetsu" (It means river flowing through the marshes in the Ainu language) is flowing along the area. Forests, which have been formed over several thousand years on the sand dune, lie along the shoreline with a length of more than 25km from north to south, and more than 100 marshes exist in the wild forests. Rich and varied natural environment like this is academically valuable, and this moor has been designated as part of Rishiri-Rebun-Sarobetsu National Park.

Several thousand geese and ducks come from the south around the time of melting of snow on marshes. Penke Marsh, central part of these moors, is very important as a breeding site of waterfowl and a stopping point for migratory birds, and holds up 1% of population of Middendorf's Bean Goose and Bewick's Swan in East Asian region. Moreover, red-crowned cranes have flown to this area for breeding. *Lacerta vivipara* can be seen on the boardwalk, and the chirps of Yellow-breasted bunting, which is valuable now, can be heard from the wilderness covered with *Hemerocallis dumortieri* var. *esculenta* and cotton grass as far as the horizon. Ezo least shrews have been very active under lush grass. Then winter is only just around the corner after the season transits from summer to fall, the wilderness turns a shining golden color and geese and ducks come from the north again. When the ground is covered with snow, Steller's sea eagles and white-tailed eagles wheel in the sky.

Marsh area of Sarobetsu wilderness dramatically decreased due to postwar large scale development, and aridification has also been advancing. Based on these situations, Kamisarobetsu Nature Restoration Committee was established in 2004, and holding of various conservation activities in which public administration and private sectors cooperate with each other, and collaboration with schools has begun. Our significant goal is to hand over this tremendous asset to the next generation while promoting coexistence of marsh and dairy farming.



(Text and pictures: NPO Sarobetsu Eco Network)

JICA 2009 Training Course on Wetland Conservation (new)

From May 18 to June 29, 2009, we welcomed four participants from the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) Obihiro International Center for a group training course entitled Conservation and Wise Use of Wetland in the Context of Implementing Ramsar Convention and CBD. The course, held under the auspices of the Ministry of the Environment, began in the current fiscal year for staff involved in nature conservation in developing nations, such as government officials in charge of natural conservation policies and nature conservation rangers.

The purpose of the training course is to enable trainees to address challenges facing their organizations in regard to promoting the conservation and wise use of wetland areas and to plan/implement specific problem-solving projects within three years. Those attending the course this time were 2 employees from the Sabah State Government in Malaysia who are involved in national park administration and 2 officials from Mongolia's Ministry of Nature, Environment and Tourism, who are in charge of wetland conservation.

The training was held in four regions - suburban Tokyo, Fujiyoshida City, Okinawa, and Kushiro in Hokkaido. Through lectures, field trips and practical training, the participants gained insights into wetland conservation based on the philosophies of the Ramsar Convention and the Convention on Biological Diversity. In particular, they learned about wetland utilization as a means to promote environmental education and tourism, examined institutional development and the operation of awareness-raising facilities in Japan, and studied examples of awareness-raising programs and eco-tour programs implemented in the public and private sectors. In a report presentation session on the last day of the training program, participants proposed draft projects based on the knowledge and experience they had gained from the training. The projects included the establishment of a working group by stakeholders involved in wetland conservation and awareness-raising activities for local residents.

During their stay in Kushiro, the participants also had a number of opportunities to interact with local elementary and high school students and volunteers for international exchange events through practical training, field trips and other events such as a home-visit program. They stated that they were impressed with the high levels of awareness regarding environmental issues among Japanese children and that they were moved by the kindness of the volunteers who helped them.



JICA 2009 Training Course on Eco-Tourism

From September 7 to October 13 of 2009, a JICA group training course entitled "Management, Operation and Sustainable Use of Natural Parks (Eco-tour)" was held. The OBIC served as the administrative institution, while KIWC acted as the hosting institution. This year, the last year of the five-year course, 5 middle-ranking administrative officers involved in national park operation and tourism promotion participated from 3 countries (Argentina, Laos and Uganda).

To promote "Eco-tours", which have recently attracted attention as a method of regional development via conservation and sustainable utilization of regional natural and cultural resources, in their own countries, the participants learned various facts on eco-tours through a variety of programs such as lectures on theory and development of laws, inspection of natural parks, and actual experience of eco-tours utilizing rich natural environment, fisheries, dairy farming and other existing industries in eastern Hokkaido. Based on these experiences, they organized their ideas with the advice of the course leader (instructor of the training) and through discussions conducted during the training between instructors and members, and presented action plans on the final day.

Although participants spent a busy one and a half month period due to many outdoor activities and tough schedules, they also played a part in exchanges in private sectors. For example, they were entertained by local people through an exchange program including visits to local households, and interacted with children via practical training for an environmental education program at elementary schools.



JICA 2009 Training Course on Participatory Environmental Conservation

From October 26 to November 12 of 2009, a JICA group training course for Mongolia entitled "Participatory Environmental Conservation" was held.

At Ogii Nuur (Nuur means a lake.), a Ramsar site, an information center for visitors and a facility for activities of local residents have recently established as part of JICA's "Catchment Area Management Model Project". As a cooperation project, training for developing human resources who manage facilities has been conducted since 2007, and it ended this year. Total of four people, consisted of local persons who have already been involved in planning and operation of the center as a staff member and officials from national and local governments who take a supporting role on these activities from the administration side, participated in the training.

Based on cases of public organizations which have been conducting regional eco-tours and environmental education activities at nature information facilities in national parks and Ramsar sites in eastern Hokkaido, participants learned exhibition methods and other knowledge necessary for promoting awareness for local residents and collaboration with them. Since the participants were all women, team work was good and willingness to study or research was high.

At the debriefing session held on the last day of the training, they presented concrete and practical proposals to utilize the absorbed knowledge in each position. We are looking forward to their practical activities after they return home.

