

RIVERS OF JAPAN

by Matthew C. Perry

The rivers of Japan add to the beauty and charm of this country that complement the many other positive attributes Japan has to offer travelers. Japan is blessed with many rivers due to the large watersheds of the volcanic mountains in the interior that collect water and move it to the sea. The rivers often have such a steep descent that once a Dutch engineer stated, “This is not a river, but a waterfall.” In recent years, I have seen many rivers as I traveled to various areas as part of a cultural exchange program sponsored by the Manjiro Whitfield Commemorative Center for International Exchange. These trans-continental friendship trips between the USA and Japan are sponsored annually to obtain a better understanding of the cultures of our two countries. Unfortunately, my involvement with rivers in Japan is often limited to being a viewer from a bus, where I have been forced to take a quick photograph and then use my imagination of what beauty and adventure await upstream.

One of the prettiest and best known of the rivers in Japan is the Shimanto Gawa (River) in Kochi Prefecture on the island of Shikoku. I saw this river while traveling to Tosashimizu, the home city of Manjiro Nakahama, the first Japanese to live in the USA. This 196 kilometer river is believed to be the last clear stream in Japan due to the lack of dams. It has good fishing and, in some parts, is used for the collection of nori (seaweed). The fish preferred by fishermen in the Shimanto River is the Ayu (sweetfish). The Shimanto River is also famous in Japan for having 47 chinkabashi or sinking bridges. These are low-water crossings that are underwater during flood conditions. The bridges do not have parapets (low wall), which could collect debris and cause the bridge to wash away. Without parapets, however, sinking bridges are dangerous and can cause drowning accidents to the unsuspecting walker or driver trying to cross during flooding. In the Kochi prefecture, the chinkabashi on the Shimanto River are now preserved as cultural landmarks in Japan.



Shimanto River from Route #56 near Nakamura



Protected levees along the Shimanto River



Sinking bridge on Roanoke River, NC, USA



Chinkabashi on Shimanto River

Another river in Kochi Prefecture is the Niyodo River, which is 124 kilometers long and located near Kochi City, 50-60 kilometers northeast of Shimanto River. Although the Niyodo River is near the densely populated city of Kochi, the water quality is clearer than the Shimanto River. Niyodo River was identified as the river with best water quality in Japan in 2010. The clear blue color of its waters, known as "Niyodo blue," is well known among children, who swim from its banks, and fishermen. River-mouth waves make the sea area attractive for surfers especially in August and September. Japanese living near the Nyodo River have a tradition of displaying floating carp streamers on this river for Boy's Day holiday, May 3-5.



Niyodo River near Kochi City



Niyodo River with reinforced banks

Further east in Kochi Prefecture on the island of Shikoku is the Nahari River, which flows through the small town of Nahari. I visited this area in 2011 and again in 2013. The town of Nahari is on the south side of Shikoku Island and the Nahari River empties into Tosa Bay. Back in the mid-1900s, the Nahari River was a major attraction for fishermen hoping to catch ayu with their long fly rods. Most Japanese fly rods are 5-7 meters long, but some reach 10 meters long. The technique used is much different than traditional western fly rods, which are relatively short and require numerous back and forth movements to slowly get enough line out to drop the artificial fly where desired. The Samurai practiced ayu fishing over 430 years ago during the Edo Period when sword fighting was prohibited. The fishing rod replaced the sword and walking on small rocks in the rivers was a good training exercise to maintain leg muscle and balance.



Nahari River - viewed north (up river) from train



Nahari River - viewed south (down river) from a car

Ayu (*Plecoglossus altivelis*) are called sweetfish due to their sweet taste. It is a preferred fish for eating, especially after skewering them and roasting over a fire of wood or charcoal. Unfortunately, the ayu is an anadromous fish like smelt and must go upriver to breed. The Nahari River has three major dams upriver, which stop the migration of the fish going to breed. The ayu are now less abundant on the Nahari and also in other rivers of Japan. The fishing season for ayu opens in June and even though numbers of ayu are less abundant than historically, fly fishermen still strive to secure preferred fishing spots for the opening day of the season. Historic pictures were obtained by Ms. Masako Sakamoto of her grandfather-in-law fishing.



Fly fishermen on Nahari River – 1960



Fly fishermen on Nahari River – 1960



Mr. Sakamoto fishing the Nahari River in the 1980s, when he was over 90 years old



Diesel locomotive pulling railway cars with cedar logs across Nahari River in 1949



Modern passenger train crossing Nahari River with one fly fisherman in River

Ayu is also the main fish captured on the Nagara River, east of Kyoto on the main island of Honshu. However, fishermen on this river use cormorants that have been trained by the fishermen to catch the ayu. A snare is tied near the base of the bird's throat, which allows the bird only to swallow small fish. When the bird captures and tries to swallow a large fish, the fish is caught in the bird's throat. When the bird returns to the fisherman's raft, the fisherman removes the fish from the bird's throat. This method, called ukai, is not as common today since more efficient methods of catching fish have been developed. I first learned of the use of cormorants to capture fish as a child from the classic tale of Ping, but have never witnessed it.



Cormorant fishing (ukai) on a river in Japan. Drawing from children's coloring book.

While visiting the city of Sendai, north of Tokyo in 2013, I had the pleasure to see the beautiful Hirose River. The viewing was quite serendipitous and occurred as we were congregating for a tour at the Sendai International Relations Association building. As I approached the building in our bus I noticed a beautiful river flowing past the meeting place. I left the group, something I rarely do, and walked across the busy street to view the river from the bridge we had just crossed. The view was spectacular. As I admired the beauty and cleanliness

of the river, I thought I saw a man upstream in the water approximately a half kilometer away. I zoomed in with my camera's telephoto lens, which revealed a lone fisherman, who was fishing with a very long fly rod. I felt guilty for spying on his moment of tranquility, but I jealously wished I had time to join him.



Hirose River from bridge in Sendai



Lone fly fisherman in the Hirose River

When I returned to the United States I contacted the host family for my homestay, Masa and Akiko Tatsuda, to learn more about the river that I had seen in Sendai. Masa responded that the river I photographed was indeed the Hirose River and gave me a website link for more information. Masa translated the sign on the website that said “Protect and keep clean Hirose River.” The samurai master, Masamune Date, is credited with the inauguration of the city of Sendai in 1600 and since then the beautiful Hirose River pools and ripples that I saw over 400 years later have been renowned with symbolic significance for the city of Sendai. In August 2013, one month after I had been to Sendai, the city of Sendai celebrated the 24th Festival of Lights on the Hirose River. Hundreds of square paper boxes were placed in the water at twilight with a lit candle in each box. The boxes floated downstream while the residents, who had placed the boxes on the water, gave wishes and prayers for their deceased relatives. An internet video I saw of this festival with boxes of light was spectacular and the event helps bring residents closer to their beloved river. Interestingly, floating lanterns are now becoming common on rivers in many US towns and cities and is a good pastime that helps residents appreciate their river, and hopefully will result in better respect and care of rivers.



Hirose River waterfall (Photo - City of Sendai)



Hirose River and fall foliage (Photo - City of Sendai)

When I flew out of Matsue in Shimane Prefecture in 2013, I took a picture of the coast line and what I thought was a beautiful river. The view caught my attention due to the juxtaposition of the river between a major city and a vegetated mountain. While in Matsue I had a homestay with Ichiro and Takiko Yoshino. I thought they might know more about the river so I contacted them for more information. I received a fast reply from Ichiro, who is an elementary school principal and speaks excellent English. He told me that the lower side of the photograph is Sakaiminato City (Tottori Prefecture), and the upper vegetative side is Mihonoseki Town (Shimane prefecture). The waterway between the two areas was not a river, however, but is the Sakaisuido channel linking Nakaumi, a brackish water inland sea, with and the Sea of Japan. The water, which flowed into Lake Shinji in the west of Matsue, is the Ibi River. Lake Shinji then flows into the Nakaumi Inland Sea via the Ohashi River. Eventually the water of the Nakaumi Inland Sea flows into the Sea of Japan through the Sakaisuido Channel.

It was a little hard to understand all this without a map, but the main point is that river water, through the never-ending force of gravity, is flowing down in elevation and eventually reaches the sea. In the areas where fresh and salt water meet there is brackish water that usually is part of an estuarine system. These areas, like Chesapeake Bay, where I have conducted research, are very important for fish, shellfish, and water birds. While in Matsue I stayed one night in a hotel on the edge of Shinji Lake and marveled at the water in this large lake that was rich with a small fresh-water clam that the local residents called shijimi (*Corbicula japonica*) and is found in many of their soups and other seafood dishes.

The Shimane Prefecture in Japan is famous for being the home of myths. One of the most famous myth of Shimane is about how the Matsue area that I photographed was originally formed. The legend passed down for centuries was that one of the Japanese gods thought this area of Japan was too narrow and cramped. So he used ropes to pull land from other areas of Japan and form what now is the unique and beautiful area I saw from the plane. Geologists might have other explanations, but I like is interesting and mystical legend and it makes the Shimane area truly “the Land of the Myths.”



Sakaisuido Channel – A waterway between contrasts



Map of Lake Shinji, Lake Nakaumi, Miho Bay, and Sea of Japan

Fortunately, both the countries of Japan and the United States realize the values of their rivers and are working hard to protect these unique areas. Although Japanese have great respect for their rivers, the dense human population in Japan requires dams on the rivers for municipal water and also for hydropower. One of the organizations in the United States that has interests in all rivers of the world is appropriately named Rivers of the World Foundation and has professional volunteers working in many countries to improve and protect our valuable river resources (<http://www.rowfoundation.org/>).

Although all humans benefit from clean rivers that are so important for drinking water and other uses, the average person in Japan and the United States probably does not realize the full value of rivers. Fortunately, fishermen and naturalists understand the direct relationship with clean water and their recreational activities. These concerned citizens are in the minority and therefore education is extremely important so all citizens of all countries know the unique value of rivers for the future quality of life. Maybe the small ayu can help in the education process.

