

RIVERS OF JAPAN

by Matthew C. Perry

The rivers of Japan offer an additional charm and beauty to this country that complements the numerous other positive attributes Japan has to offer to 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 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. The trips are sponsored annually to obtain a better understanding of the cultures of our two countries. Unfortunately, my involvement with rivers in Japan is often as a viewer from a bus where I have been forced to take a quick picture 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. This 196 km river is considered the last clear stream in Japan due to the lack of dams. It has good fishing and also in some parts is used for the collection of nori (seaweed). The fish that is preferred by fishermen in the Shimanto is the Ayu (sweet fish). The Shimanto 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, 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. The chinkabashi on the Shimanto River in Kochi prefecture are now preserved as cultural landmarks in Japan.



Shimanto River from Route #56 near Nakamura



Protected levees along the Shimanto River



Sinking bridge without parapets in United States



Chinkabashi on Shimanto River

Another river in Kochi Prefecture is the Niyodo River, which is 124 kilometers long and is located near Kochi City, 50-60 kilometers northeast of the Shimanto River. Although the Niyodo is near the densely populated city of Kochi the water quality of Niyodo River is clearer than Shimanto. Niyodo 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 fishermen and the children who swim from its banks. River-mouth waves make the sea area an attraction for surfers especially in August and September. Japanese who live near the Nyodo River, have a tradition of displaying floating carp streamers on the River for the Boy's Day holiday May 3-5.



Niyodo River near Kochi City



Niyodo River with reinforced banks

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 Convention Center. As I approached the building in our bus I noticed a beautiful river flowing past the Center. 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 and 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 telephoto lens, which revealed a lone fisherman with a very long fly rod. I felt guilty for spying on his moment of tranquility, but 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 sent an email to my host family, Masa and Akiko Tatsuda, to learn more about the river that I had seen in Sendai. Masa responded that the river was indeed the Hirose River and gave me a web site 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 river pools and ripples that I had seen 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 with the residents who placed the boxes in the water gave wishes and prayers for their deceased relatives. The video I saw of this festival with floating 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 results in better respect and care.



Hirose River waterfall (Photo - City of Sendai)



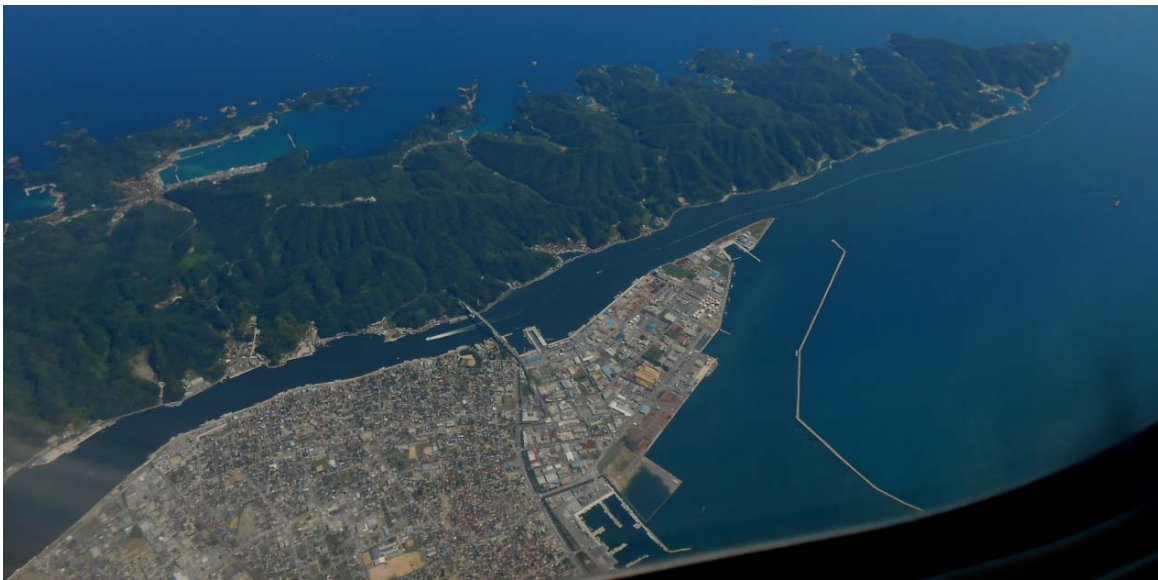
Hirose River and fall foliage (Photo - City of Sendai)

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 emailed 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 conducted research, are very important for fish, shellfish, and water birds. While in Matsue I stayed 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.

Fortunately, both countries of Japan and the United States realize the values of their rivers and are working hard to protect these unique areas. 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/>).



Sakaisuido Channel – A waterway between contrasts

