



TOP: Characters from Hikone at the opening of the Kigurumi Summit: (From the left) Yachinyan, Hikonyan and Shimasakonyan.

BOTTOM LEFT: Ogoton (left) hails from Ogoto Onsen in Otsu, while Jimokun (right) represents moji-ku in Kita-Kyushu, Fukuoka Prefecture.

BOTTOM CENTER: Toripy, the official PR mascot from Tottori Prefecture.
BOTTOM RIGHT: Toshinaga-kun, a mascot representative of the Edo period feudal lord, Takaoka City, Toyama Prefecture.

LOCAL CHARACTER

In October last year a horde of giant mascots created to publicize various localities in Japan descended on Hikone, Shiga Prefecture. Forty-six in all, these regional symbols had come from all over Japan to take part in the “Kigurumi Summit,” a festival of costumed regional mascots. The venue thronged with 46,000 visitors of all ages, who were thrilled by the sight of so many mascots.

The stars included Hikonyan, a nationally-popular cat mascot from a festival to mark the 400th anniversary of Hikone Castle, a national treasure.

“Hikonyan wasn’t so popular when we just used the image in illustrations,” recalls Keiichi Tomita, chairman of the Kigurumi Summit organizing committee. “But when we brought the character to life in mascot form and took it around the country, it gained popularity as people were attracted to its cute way of moving. As a result, group of families visited Hikone to meet Hikonyan, and this led to the

success of the festival.”

In addition to Hikonyan, various other characters have been created in Japan to publicize tourist spots and regional specialties. As well as being used for novelty character goods and advertising, they appear in life-size mascot form at events all over the country to do their bit for public relations.

Many characters have well-developed personalities, preferences and interests that reflect the characteristics and local cultures of their home regions, and these idiosyncrasies only serve to make them more popular.

The Kigurumi Summit gathers all these regional ambassadors in one place. Via their favorite characters, participants become interested in noted spots and local specialties from every part of Japan. Preparations are already under way for a second summit in September 2009, and the fan base for these regional mascots seems set to keep on growing.