

Learning from Nature and Adventure

MITSURO Ohba is an adventurer who has accomplished numerous great feats, such as going down 6,000 km of the Amazon River on a solo raft (1983), walking 1,400 km of the Greenland west coast solo (1985), crossing the Arctic Ocean on foot solo as a world-first (1997), and crossing Antarctica on foot solo (1999). He is currently the president of Earth Academy Mitsuro Ohba Adventure School in his hometown of Mogami Town, Yamagata Prefecture, where he continues to think about the future of the planet and children. We met him there to ask about nature, adventure, and the mountains of his hometown.

What was your upbringing like as a child?

I was born as the eldest son of a farmer in a mountain village rich in nature in Mogami Town in 1953. As a child, I was always playing out in nature whenever I wasn't at school or at home. I'd catch fish and swim in the river, and pick wild plants, mushrooms and chestnuts in the mountains. I felt on top of the world when lying down and sleeping on the dry leaves on the ground. I also loved listening to the calls of all the different birds in the mountains.

In my second year of middle school, I met the falconer Kutsuzawa Asaji, and his way of life had a big impact on me. Mr. Kutsuzawa lived in the neighboring town, growing rice in the summer and hunting rabbits and other animals using a mountain hawk-eagle in the winter. Wild hawk-eagles are extremely fierce and wary, so they're extremely difficult to tame, but Mr. Kutsuzawa

had developed absolute trust with his hawk-eagles. I admired Mr. Kutsuzawa as he lived in harmony with the mountain nature together with this hawk-eagles. It became also my dream to balance farming and falconry in my life.

Why did you decide to become an adventurer?

After graduating from school, I took over the family farming business, but like so many farmers back then, farming alone was rarely enough to make a living, so I went to work in the city during the leisure season. I lived like that for seven years and started wondering why it's not possible to live in Japan on farming alone. That made me want to know about the situation in other countries, so I went on budget trips to Europe and Africa. This made me realize how much fun traveling abroad is. Eventually, I got bored of regular travel, so I started going on adventures into harsh nature, like the Amazon, the Arctic and Antarctica. My family loudly protested against my quitting farming and going on adventures abroad, but I wanted to live according to Kutsuzawa's words that "People have to do what they like. If not, you won't be able to die with a smile on your face."

What did you feel on your adventures to the polar regions of the Arctic and Antarctica?

I strongly felt that humans are part of nature. Meditatively walking in that white land, I felt as if I had blended with nature. In those instances, I was filled with energy and could walk on without getting tired. Of course, there were several times I could have died. Every time that happened, my

Adventurer Mitsuro Ohba at his school with tents, clothing and photographs from his many expeditions



mind was filled with thoughts about my hometown, from the smells of the soil and grass of the fields to the taste of the spring water I drank in the mountains, and I strongly thought “I have to go back there alive.” The adventures taught me the importance of having reverence for nature, humility and gratitude.

What is the aim of Earth Academy Mitsuro Ohba Adventure School that you founded in 2001?

The adventure school offers varied experience programs that include mountain climbing, river rafting, growing vegetables, skiing, building igloos, sleighing and snow camping. Nature makes people notice a variety of things, and so it’s like a teacher. However, especially children today have extremely few opportunities to directly come in contact with nature. I want to help them acquire the wisdom necessary for people to live by providing such opportunities. In fact, all the children enjoy their experiences in nature and go back home filled with energy.

The nature of the mountains around Mogami Town is fantastic. The view from Mount Kamuro with its long ridge is extremely beautiful, and it’s a lot of fun to walk the Natagiritoge trail where a primeval forest of dense beech grows.

Tell us about your dreams for the future.

In the polar regions, I felt the effects of global warming, for example in the receding glaciers. I want more people to feel concerned about global environmental problems, so in 2004, I started a “longitudinal trip around the world,” going from the Arctic through North and South America to Antarctica, and from there up north again via Australia, Japan, and Siberia to the Arctic again. Along this trip, myself and several team members communicate about the natural environment and people’s lives and culture that we investigate on-site. I have so far traveled in Greenland and the Canadian Arctic, investigating the atmosphere and snow, and conveying what it’s like in these places to children in Japan, Costa Rica, Germany, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and other countries via satellite phone. This project has unfortunately been suspended for almost ten years, but I’m not giving up and want to continue the trip.

Moreover, I want to keep communicating the wonder and harshness of nature to the children at the adventure school. 📖

Interview by OSAMU SAWAJI
