



Sakano Akira,
chair of the Zero
Waste Academy

In Pursuit of a Zero-Waste Society

SAKANO Akira, chair of the Zero Waste Academy in Kamikatsu Town (pop. 1,500) nestled in the mountains of Tokushima Prefecture, engages in activities to further initiatives for eliminating waste emissions.

What inspired you to take an interest in environmental issues?

At the age of 10, I learned from a picture book that the kakapo, a flightless avian species native to New Zealand, was endangered by activities of human and invasive species. I loved birds so much that I started to think about how to protect it. My interest in nature conservation and environmental issues thus gained momentum.

Based on the idea that a change of the mechanisms in society was necessary to resolve environmental problems, I studied environmental policies at university. After graduation from university, I worked for a company for around two years. Then, I decided to go to graduate school,

and for a while before starting, I stayed in Kamikatsu, the hometown of a friend from university. At that time, while it must be fate, I decided to suspend entering the graduate school and instead to work for the non-profit organization Zero Waste Academy, which was looking for staff. The Zero Waste Academy was set up chiefly by the Kamikatsu Town government in 2005 to implement activities such as human resources development, awareness raising, and research for the zero-waste initiative aiming to build a society with no waste emissions. I wondered what was possible and what was not in dealing with environmental issues, but I thought that it would be an opportunity to verify the effect of environmental policies in a specific area, not an abstract one. I became chair of the Academy in 2015.

What zero-waste actions are conducted in Kamikatsu?

Kamikatsu Town announced the Zero Waste Declaration in 2003 to launch an initiative for pushing ahead with the reduction, reuse, and recycling of waste to maximally eliminate waste that has to be incinerated or placed in landfills by 2020. To attain this goal, town inhabitants carry their domestic waste to a waste collection center themselves and sort it into forty-five different types, such as bottles, cans and paper. At the collection center, there is what we call Kuru-Kuru Re-use Shop. It displays tableware, clothes and other items that people have brought from home, and anyone

can take them home for free. Each household composts its kitchen refuse. As a result of these efforts, the town boasts a recycling rate of approximately 80%, nearly four times higher than the national average. The town faces issues of aging and the shrinkage of its population and has insufficient financial resources to invest in a high-cost waste disposal facility. Behind this success lies an idea shared by officials and inhabitants that they need to resolve local problems themselves. The remaining 20% or so of waste includes PVC, rubber, disposable diapers and other materials that are presently difficult to recycle. It is necessary to change product designs and society to banish products that end up as waste.

What is the Zero Waste Academy doing to address this?

In 2017, the Zero Waste Academy launched an accreditation program for businesses engaging in zero-waste activities such as recycling and waste emission reduction. So far, thirteen entities and twelve brands have been certified, including restaurants and clothing stores in the town, in Kanagawa Prefecture, in Kochi Prefecture and elsewhere. More and more businesses stopping their purchases of items that must end up as waste will accelerate the shift to the society with no waste.

Apart from that, we conduct educational and training activities inside and outside the town. In September 2019, we developed a card game that helps children have fun while learning about zero-waste practices. Players draw cards featuring items seen in everyday life, such as straws, plastic bags and damaged socks, and then think about how to reuse, repair, upcycle, recycle, rot (compost) and refuse (not use to begin with) them. Children think deeply to work out ideas for using items for a long time or refusing them while playing the game. I hope that this will influence their actions in daily life.

You co-chaired the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting in Switzerland in January 2019 (Davos 2019). Was there anything in particular that impressed you?

A discussion I had with the Costa Rican president was unforgettable. His nation has made various advanced efforts in the environmental area, but I have heard that there is room for improvement in waste collection and recycling. The president asked us for some help for Costa Rica on the basis of the experience of our town.

I still have no idea how we can support Costa Rica in a practical way, yet this conversation gave us strong encouragement in terms of our potential roles in the international field. We have so far responded to a large number of requests from people inside and outside the country asking to come and see our town, and for us to teach workshops, and we've sent out information online. That has gradually increased international recognition of what has been done in the town. In fact, things like our Kuru-Kuru Re-use Shop are now found in Malaysia and other countries. Kamikatsu is one of the few municipalities in the world where all of the inhabitants take part in zero-waste activities, and I suppose it is a beacon of hope for communities facing waste issues.

What aspirations do you have for the future?

We will provide support for spreading the actions of Kamikatsu to other regions inside and outside Japan by localizing them in each region. Inspired by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and ESG (environment, social and environment) finance in Japan, we will also work more closely on changing environmental actions of companies and on policymaking to raise public awareness about the environment and on accelerating behavioral changes. 

Interview by SAWAJI OSAMU
