

## Tokyo Initiatives for Sustainable Urban Systems in Harmony with Nature

Climate change will be the major theme at COP29, which will be held in Azerbaijan from November 11 2024. In this vein, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government is promoting major efforts toward environmental protection and sustainable urban planning, to bolster the coexistence between cities and nature. Through sharing these ideas with the international community, Tokyo's urban environmental policy can provide models for mutual, sustainable development.



kingfisher (c) Tokyo Metropolitan Government

## **Conserving Tokyo's Green Satoyama**

*Satoyama*, the areas between mountain foothills and arable land, where nature and people coexist in proximity, were once important areas for farming and forestry, as well as habitats for a diverse array of plant and animal life. In 2015 the Tokyo Metropolitan Government launched the SATOYAMA project to organize nature-oriented programs for all ages in conservation areas around western Tokyo's Tama region.

"Tokyo has a lot more nature than you'd think," a representative from the Tokyo Environmental Public Service Corporation says. "Lifestyle changes have made it harder to connect with nature in the city center, but there are plenty of efforts to preserve as much nature as possible. Governmental ordinances designate high-quality natural environments and forests that are parts of important historical sites—on both public or private land—as conservation areas."

While these government-designated preservation areas help safeguard nature in Tokyo by regulating land improvements and other development activities, they face their own set of serious challenges. A completely hands-off approach leaves areas prone to deterioration and expose them to non-native species, threatening their ecosystems.

The SATOYAMA project aims to help meet those challenges. With the help of volunteers, the initiative drives efforts to thin thickets, clear underbrush, tend to rice paddies, and perform maintenance throughout the conservation areas. "There are active efforts going on in 39 of the 50 government-designated conservation areas, and local volunteer organizations are behind most of the work," the representative says. "But we also get a lot of help from all the people who take part in the 40 or so SATOYAMA experience programs we put together every year."

Other government-driven efforts making an impact along similar lines include Tokyo Greenship Action and the Tokyo Green Campus Program, where private companies and universities collaborate with NPOs and the TMG on nature-conservation activities.

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## **Kingfishers Returning to Neighborhoods in Central Tokyo**

Kingfishers are elegant birds with bright cobalt blue and orange plumage and a long beak. According to a survey from 1968 by the Wild Bird Society of Japan, at the time the only place in Tokyo where the bird could be seen was deep in the mountains of the Okutama area. According to Professor Yanase Hiroichi at the Institute for Liberal Arts, \*Institute of Science Tokyo, this was due to "environmental pollution caused by the rapid economic growth of the postwar period, which made the rivers uninhabitable for the kingfisher's food sources such as fish and shrimp."

But these days it is possible to once again spot the jewel-like birds in the heart of the city. Yanase says that the answer to this resurgence is simple. "The rivers in the city center have become clean enough for fish to live in," he notes. "In fact, along the Kanda River I can spot Haguro damselflies, which only live around clear streams. This shows just how much the water quality has improved."

However, the creatures that inhabit the rivers in the city center today are not the same as in the past. The professor describes the current situation as the "new wild," where such non-native species and brackish-water fish have increased in the rivers of central Tokyo. This has led kingfishers in search of food to return and make their nests in drainage pipe holes, not dissimilar to what they would usually dig for themselves in riverbanks.

So-called "old wild" areas still remain in Tokyo, such as the Shibuya River, believed to have its source in a spring in Shinjuku Gyoen National Garden, one of the city's largest green spaces. Though its name changes from section to section, kingfishers live year-round along its tributaries.

This coexistence of new and old wilds is a hopeful sign. "Now that the rivers have been cleaned up, I would like to see initiatives to connect the old and new wilds by systematically releasing native fish species with the help of biologists," says Yanase.

\*The Tokyo Institute of Technology merged with Tokyo Medical and Dental University to form the Institute of Science Tokyo on October 1, 2024.

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## **Protecting Tokyo's Water Supply and Connecting Residents to Nature**

As of April 2024, Tokyo's water conservation forests cover an area four times bigger than Manhattan, the largest forest in the country owned by any water supply utility. The water conservation forests are essential for residents of the capital, so the Tokyo Waterworks Bureau has established naming rights for parts of the forests and works with companies to maintain them.

An official from the bureau explains the purpose of incorporating naming rights into forest conservation efforts. "We have been managing the forests for over 120 years, and need to promote systematic forest conservation in order to continue proper management. Through cooperation, we can promote the importance of water source conservation and expand participation in forest maintenance."

One example is Casio Forest, named by Casio Computer Co., Ltd. The company's activities range from site preparation to planting, weeding, and thinning to maintain an appropriate forest

environment, as well as acorn collection to grow more oaks. They also install nest boxes to encourage the breeding of wild birds, who help control diseases and pests.

By agreement with the Tokyo Waterworks Bureau, Casio holds on-site activities three times a year. While initially only about a dozen people participated, the number gradually increased over the years. "We have repeat participants, but as we published our activity reports internally, more and more employees became interested. They also wanted to come with their family members, and the circle gradually expanded," says Yamagishi Masakatsu of the Sustainability Promotion Office at Casio's Corporate Communication Headquarters.

Casio is also actively working towards nature conservation at its seven offices nationwide, fostering a shared culture and influencing new projects for the group.

Casio has since started WILD MIND GO! GO!, a website that proposes nature experiences that allow children and adults to enjoy learning skills connected to the natural world, such as farming and outdoor adventures such as stand up paddleboarding. They also created an app called Tokyo Parks Play for the Tokyo Metropolitan Park Association, which allows users to enjoy real-life parks digitally. The app provides information on various facilities and events in public parks managed by the Tokyo Metropolitan Park Association, as well as coupons, digital quizzes, digital guides and more.

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## **Tokyo's New Neighborhood, Where People and Nature Co-exist in Harmony**

In November 2023, a new neighborhood was born in Tokyo. Azabudai Hills is a "Vertical Garden City" that offers a variety of urban functions such as offices, residences, hotels, shops, medical facilities, and even an international school, all within walking distance.

Azabudai Hills was the result of around 35 years of careful planning, to create a new, more natural way of living in Japan's capital. "The concept is a plaza-like neighborhood surrounded by greenery that will bring people together," says Watanabe Moichi of the Town Management Department at Mori Building Co., Ltd., the developer behind the project. "It is a completely new type of neighborhood built around a plaza where people can gather, surrounded by lots of greenery."

Unlike the conventional way of town planning, where buildings come first and then the spaces in-between are turned into green space, here Mori Building took a new approach by creating the central plaza and green areas first, then deciding on the placement of three high-rise towers.

The total area of the plaza is around 6,000 square meters, with around 2.4 hectares of green space throughout. Taking advantage of the hilly terrain, water flows through the neighborhood,

and a biodiverse variety of plants are spread throughout the site, seamlessly connecting human activities in the city. A certified arborist selected around 320 plant species from all over Japan, based on the original vegetation that would have flourished in this area on the eastern edge of the Musashino Plateau. Ten varieties of cherry trees with different blooming times have also been planted throughout the area, creating a new *hanami* (cherry blossom viewing) spot in the capital.

Perhaps most important of all is the infrastructure, as Azabudai Hills is entirely powered by renewable energy and promotes decarbonization and recycling. They are also proactively tackling numerous issues facing modern society, such as protecting biodiversity, conserving energy, and extending healthy life expectancy. It will be exciting to see what possibilities this "Vertical Garden City" will open up in the next 50 to 100 years.

The Tokyo Metropolitan Government is aiming to strengthen green urban development over the next 100 years, to protect, cultivate, and utilize Tokyo's greenery. Important initiatives like those above are just one part of efforts to transform Tokyo into a sustainable city that exists in harmony with nature.

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