

Getting Storks Back into Wild Ambitious Attempt Proving Successful

By Isao ADACHI

A project to reintroduce artificially bred Oriental white storks into the wild is successfully under way in Toyooka, Hyogo Prefecture, on the Japan Sea Coast in western Japan after the bird disappeared from the country decades ago. The experiment to restore a natural environment in a region inhabited by people and let the once-extinct birds fly in the wild again is unprecedented in the world. It is an ambitious attempt to show that restoration of nature symbolized by storks benefits the regional economy as well.

The Oriental white stork, which has a 2-meter wingspan, is related to the European white stork and looks like the red-crowned crane. The bird was once found in various parts of Japan but its population rapidly shrank due to over-hunting as well as a sharp decrease in loaches, frogs and other live prey, caused by agricultural chemicals. The last wild white stork seen in the Toyooka basin disappeared in 1971. It was in 1985 that the artificial breeding of storks in Toyooka started with six birds donated from the Maritime Region in the then Soviet Far East. Four years later, the breeding succeeded and the project, originally aimed at captive propagation, has advanced to the release of the bird back into the wild.

With the Hyogo Prefectural Homeland for the Oriental White Stork opened in Toyooka in 1999, a "civic stork institute" was inaugurated to observe nature and study living things of the region in an effort involving children. Thanks to the campaign, an increasing number of farmers are engaged in organic farming by stopping or reducing the use of agricultural chemicals and instead using domestic ducks in controlling harmful insects in paddy fields, where the storks feed. The chemical-free paddy fields have expanded to cover 183 hectares.

"Since we were intrinsically skeptical of agricultural chemicals, rice growing without their use was a natural corollary," said Hitoshi Miyagaki, an official in charge of symbiosis with storks at the Toyooka Municipal Office. "We have held workshops and other activities to study labor-saving and cost-reducing techniques while reducing the use of agricultural chemicals, seeing agriculture from the viewpoint of protecting living matter." Farming households in Toyooka are aging and they find themselves hard-pressed to remove weeds in paddy fields without agricultural chemicals.

In considering measures to address the situation, the Toyooka farmers reached the conclusion that rice growing would not be seriously affected even if weeds grew in paddy fields to a certain extent and that the minimal use of low-toxin agricultural chemicals might be permissible. "We asked each farming household to think to



what extent they could manage by themselves," Miyagaki said. Toyooka's rice-growing method attracted the interest of people in the Kunitomi area of Obama City, Fukui Prefecture, which was once inhabited by storks. Rice growers in the two regions are promoting exchanges.

Releasing back into the wild the storks kept at the prefectural stork park started in September 2005. The number of birds born of the artificially bred storks and released into the wild is increasing year by year and now totals 28, eight of which were born in the wild this year. It is a common scene now to see the storks descending onto paddy fields and catching food. This bears witness to an increase in paddy-field wildlife.

The activities for restoring regional nature, symbolized by storks, can hardly succeed without the backing of economic benefits. In this regard, increasing needs for safe food serve as a tailwind. In fact, the stork-brand rice, produced in Toyooka without agricultural chemicals, is enjoying good sales even though priced high at ¥3,500 per 5 kg, about 1.5 times more costly than ordinary rice. The stork-brand rice is popular among consumers in various parts of the country, including Tokyo.

The reintroduction of storks into the wild has had a positive effect on tourism as well. The number of visitors to the stork homeland has increased to 450,000 a year, three times more than the 150,000 before the birds' release.

Naoki Yamaguchi, chief administrator of the stork park, hailed as "great" the local people's efforts to protect the storks. However, as is the case with farming communities all over the country, Toyooka faces the serious problem of finding young people who will carry on with agriculture.

"The Toyooka stork project should hopefully be used as a reference case for scientific studies," said Miyagaki. "Furthermore, if technical support is extended to what we do here and new businesses and jobs are created, then young people will take interest in agriculture." He believes what is important is to enhance the value of agriculture in the community. **JS**

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