

Softland Plan for Hokkaido

By *Kawasaki Kazuhiko*

HOKKAIDO Prefecture is the northernmost part of Japan, and comprises 22% of the country's total area. It is roughly equivalent in size to Austria. With 5.63 million residents (exceeding the population of Denmark), Hokkaido's population accounts for 4.5% of Japan's total population.

Hokkaido's pioneering history began in 1869 when the Hokkaido Development Agency was first established there.

At that time, the population was a mere 58,000, but it eventually peaked at 5.68 million in 1985. During the 20th century, no region of any other developed country in the world experienced a similar economic and population growth.

The Japanese government has given Hokkaido special treatment regarding infrastructural development and in recent years the level of public investment has risen to 10%. However, this scheme cannot continue in light of Japan's present fiscal situation. In the last few years, the economy has stagnated and in 2001, the Hokkaido Development Agency was abolished. Due to the huge deficit in interregional balance of payments, Hokkaido must upgrade its industrial structure, and various measures are now being taken.

Up till now, the prefecture has enjoyed a pioneering spirit as manifested in the form of physical endurance against the harsh conditions of nature. However, the present challenge facing that spirit is how the intellect can be used to upgrade Hokkaido's industrial structure.

I will introduce our efforts in three specific areas: creating industrial clusters, cultivating an entrepreneurial spirit and promoting tourism.

Activities of Industrial Cluster Creation in Hokkaido

In 1996, the private sector established the Industrial Cluster Research Association to learn from the experience in Northern Europe and elsewhere

regarding the creation of industrial clusters, and has since achieved the following:

- 1) 73 projects have reached the operational stage with sales rising to ¥3 billion in FY 2005, marking a threefold increase from the level of two years prior. Some examples include high added-value food products such as organic herbal teas and turkeys, Phokkaido (Hokkaido Photo Library), an automatic feeding system installed in barns for cows, the development of raw materials for cosmetics from salmon skin collagen, the development of a residential air-conditioning system that uses snow, and the development of hygiene control equipment using ozone.
- 2) Construction of "Collabo Hokkaido", which is a facility promoting collaboration among private industry, academia and the government. Plans are also being made to build a research park.
- 3) Cluster study groups of more than 1,000 members engaged in various activities have been inaugurated to develop industrial clusters in 29 areas of Hokkaido.

The reason why the industrial cluster concept has been embraced so quickly is that it allows the private sector to take innovative initiatives while the history of Hokkaido's development has been dominated by government-led initiatives. To paraphrase a famous remark by former US President John F. Kennedy, "Ask not what Hokkaido can do for you, but what you can do for Hokkaido." No doubt there are growing numbers of people in the prefecture who would agree with this sentiment.

Cultivating Entrepreneurship Prior to Entering University

I am carrying out in research to develop a curriculum, texts, and a program to train teachers for entrepreneurship education at the elementary and secondary school levels by adopting ideas used in entrepreneurship education in Finland. As part of this, I have had students of

some high schools participate in such activities as a project to invigorate Sapporo's Minami Ward, making goods for Asahiyama Zoo, planning original tours in Sapporo, inviting Finnish junior high school students to take part in an international internship program, and seeking the "dream job."

The Hokkaido government has been successful at entrepreneurship research projects at 42 elementary to high schools throughout Hokkaido in accordance with the campaign pledge made by Hokkaido Governor Takahashi Harumi. People are actively embarking on innovative educational projects such as the Iwamizawa Kids Venture Project and career education that makes use of the industrial resources of Otaru City.

Hokkaido as a Popular Tourist Destination

There is no comparison between Hokkaido's natural scenery and that of Honshu to the south. Hokkaido's national parks account for a quarter of the total area of Japan's national parks and the prefecture has the largest number of hot spring resorts in the country. Moreover, Shiretoko was designated a World Natural Heritage site last year.

Hokkaido offers fresh food produce, and is the most popular tourist destination in Japan. In FY 2004, 48.4 million tourists visited Hokkaido and the air-route between Sapporo and Tokyo is now the world's busiest in terms of passengers.

In 2002, Prime Minister Koizumi made a pledge to turn Japan into a major tourist destination, thus launched the Visit Japan Campaign. In 2005, the number of overseas visitors to Japan rose to 6.7 million, well on the way to reaching the target of 10 million visitors by 2010.

In FY 2004, 430,000 foreign tourists visited Hokkaido, marking a 45% increase over the previous year. Of these, 88% were from other Asian regions such as Taiwan, Hong Kong and

Photo: Sapporo Concert Hall

South Korea. Moreover, 53,000 Australians visited Hokkaido, thus representing the largest number of visitors from a country outside Asia. Australian capital is now being invested in the Niseko development. A major attraction is that there is hardly any time difference between Australia and Japan. Australians also like the idea of having fun on the beach one day in Australia, and then skiing on some of the world's finest powder snow the next day in Niseko.

Sapporo's Kitara Concert Hall, the Finest in the World

The Danish National Broadcasting Corp. conducted a survey of the world's major concert halls to obtain ideas for constructing a new concert hall in Copenhagen in 2001. Sapporo's Kitara Concert Hall received the highest overall evaluation, eclipsing even Berlin's famous concert hall, which has made Kitara a major attraction for many tourists and musicians coming to Sapporo*.

Unique Animal Viewing Facilities at Asahiyama Zoo and a Popular Chef

Asahiyama Zoo in Asahikawa City in Hokkaido enjoys a good reputation throughout Japan, and its seal house is particularly popular. Zoo Director Kosuge Masao says, "The idea of the seal house is to let people feel at one with the seals when watching them in action. After people leave the seal house at night, the seals will not come out because they feel it is boring without visitors." The idea for the seal viewing facilities stemmed from the special Japanese perspective about togetherness with animals.

Nukita Keiichi, a chef who skillfully uses locally grown ingredients in preparing French cuisine, is also popular. He helps to enliven local communities in Hokkaido by traveling around the prefecture to visit food producers and devise menus that make the most of their produce.



Sapporo's Kitara Concert Hall was evaluated as the finest concert hall in the world

Hokkaido Closer to Global Standards

A few years ago in Japan, the issue of global standards was actively debated, with the tone being that Japanese standards were behind global standards, mainly due to Japan's prolonged economic slump. At the time, US standards were the only legitimate global standards. However, it should also be possible for other countries to create global standards.

In the East, standards are rooted in monistic theory, while those in the West are based on a dualistic theory. As far as Japan is concerned, the challenge posed in the future is how to transcend the limits of dualistic theory and create new global standards based on monistic theory.

Is the common way of thinking in Hokkaido the same as that in other parts of Japan? In my experience over the last years, I find that people in Hokkaido think differently from people elsewhere in Japan. In terms of character, the people of Hokkaido are similar to Europeans and Americans in that they are open and straight to the point when communicating with others. Students from

Scandinavia have all said that they feel comfortable with the attitudes of people in Hokkaido. Their ancestors came from the main island in search of new value in their lives. Thus, they were not bound by history or culture, and it could be said that they shared a common background with the people in California and Australia.

Although Hokkaido is certainly unlike Tokyo and other parts of the main island, we may consider its standards to be the closest to global standards in Japan.

I used to live in Sweden for a long time and had no intention of returning to Japan. However, my experience in Hokkaido has been that it is not like the rest of Japan and that I can easily live in Hokkaido.

I highly recommend the "Softland Plan for Hokkaido" to those who have an interest in tourism or investment in Hokkaido. **JS**

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*Note : For details, visit http://www.dr.dk/koncerthuset/english_summary/architecture.asp