

The Potential of Hokkaido



By *Takahashi Harumi*

Introduction

I was elected governor of Hokkaido in April 2003 on an electoral platform that proposed the building of a “New Hokkaido.” There has been a great deal of support for the goal to tap Hokkaido’s full potential, and create a land that will endure forever, given its unique natural resources, environment, ample supply of talented human resources and prime industrial locations. These ambitions continue to grow even in my fourth year of office.

Hokkaido is the northernmost island of Japan. It is inhabited by 5.6 million people, less than 5% of Japan’s total population, living in an area accounting for more than 20% of Japan’s entire land mass. There is a completely different lifestyle here, with an abundance of nature, far from Japan’s commonly perceived image of being “a crowded island country.” The ratio of people to land in Hokkaido is equivalent to the entire population of Denmark living in Austria.

Situated in an area spanning both the northernmost edge of the warm, tem-

perate zone and the southernmost edge of the sub-arctic zone, Hokkaido is surrounded by ocean. Though it does experience all four seasons, including heavy snowfall in winter, it is hardly affected by the uncomfortable rainy season and typhoons that are typical of East Asia.

Due to such climatic conditions as heavy snow and cool temperatures, and given its relatively long distance from the nation’s capital city of Tokyo, Hokkaido’s development has historically been slow. Yet the heavy snow has allowed for an abundance of water, and is a rich base for agriculture and a source for hydroelectric power. Moreover, one benefit of its slower growth rate has been that Hokkaido has retained an abundance of untapped natural resources, including natural gas resources, thus offering many possibilities. I feel that my experience as director of Hokkaido’s Industrial and Economic Bureau has helped me understand the true potential of Hokkaido and its many advantages, thus leading me to run as a candidate for governor of Hokkaido.

Abundant in Nature and Resources

Perhaps many of you already know that the Shiretoko district (in eastern Hokkaido), was registered as a World Natural Heritage site last July. But, many people do not know that Hokkaido’s natural environment comprises approximately one-fourth of Japan’s total forest area, and that national parks account for 10% of Hokkaido’s total landmass.

Another benefit of these natural resources is noticeable in food production. This is clearly evident by looking at Hokkaido’s food self-sufficiency ratio of 201%, while that of

Japan as a whole (based on caloric value) is only around 40%. Furthermore, along with the rich forests and the surrounding ocean comes a plentiful marine products industry. In fact, Hokkaido is the source of about 20% of Japan’s entire marine products industry, and I am sure that many of you have seen “Product of Hokkaido” indicated on wild salmon and scallops coming from Japan.

When Hokkaido was first opened up to development around 120 years ago, its abundance of food attracted attention. Many intelligent people were invited from the United States to implement the most advanced methods of land development and consequently to create the building blocks for Hokkaido’s large-scale agriculture and livestock industries. Hokkaido University continues to make use of this knowledge and its practical application even to the present day. In turn this has allowed for the ongoing development and expansion of biotechnology centered at Hokkaido University.

Hokkaido’s nature has also been a significant contributing factor to increasing the benefits from tourism, attracting more than 420,000 visitors from abroad every year.

Many volcanoes as well as an abundance of underground water sources have combined to form numerous hot springs across almost all of Hokkaido’s 180 districts. Tourists from East Asian countries have heralded these hot springs as a “unique Japanese experience.”

In addition, the powder snow that covers Hokkaido in winter attracts skiers from overseas, and has recently brought a large number of Australian tourists to the Niseko area, as well as capital investment from Australia that has funded the construction of large-scale condominiums.

With its abundant snow, Hokkaido is also known for its annual Snow Festival in Sapporo. The Snow Festival attracts tourists from around the world. The precisely sculpted snow statues, some of

Photo : Hokkaido



Takinoue Park in Hokkaido is famous for its exquisite Shibazakura (Moss phlox) blossoms

which tower over 10m, attract many foreign tourists and domestic visitors.

Tourists increasingly come to Hokkaido to visit the World Natural Heritage site of Shiretoko, but Hokkaido has been known as a summer resort by many avid fans, due to its cool weather and beautiful scenery. There are even some enthusiasts who come to see the beautiful floral scenery of Hokkaido during its short summer.

One only needs to come to Hokkaido to view the richness of its nature, and to see that there is much more than what I could possibly explain. At least, I feel that I could honestly guarantee once you visit Hokkaido, you will certainly want to return.

Highly Advantageous Industrial Locations and Conditions

Hokkaido's value can also be seen in its highly advantageous industrial locations and conditions.

To begin with, Hokkaido's advantageous geographical conditions are worthy of mention. Many companies are interested in potential business opportunities here due to Hokkaido's proximity to East Asian countries, as well as to Sakhalin, where a natural gas project is underway. Moreover, due to the ongoing expansion of the automobile manufacturing industry into mainland Russia, more opportunities may be expected in the future.

Japan's policy of allocating 10% of its entire infrastructure budget towards the development of Hokkaido has contributed to the rapid growth of this area, resulting in the construction of a significant infrastructure.

The new harbor in Ishikari Bay on the Japan Sea side in central Hokkaido, and the Tomakomai and Muroran harbor on the Pacific Ocean side have been improved and developed to serve as international trade centers. Toyota Motor Co., Ltd. established its presence in the Tomakomai area to make use of the geographical advantages as well as the knowledge accumulated from the local, long-standing steel industry. The region has since attracted many addi-

tional automobile production and manufacturing plants, and has become known as the "Iburi industry district."

Many airports have also been built, with the largest being New Chitose International Airport located close to Tomakomai and Sapporo. There are currently 11 regularly-scheduled routes, with flights to and from South Korea, China, Taiwan, Russia and Australia. There are also plans to expand the South Korean routes, thus further increasing air service. Flight routes linking Tokyo, the "Shin Chitose - Haneda" flights, carry about 9.6 million people per year, making it the busiest flight route in Japan.

Last year, work began on the construction of the Hokkaido Shinkansen (or bullet train) that promises to dramatically increase Hokkaido's development. Completion of this line is expected within 10 years. This type of high-volume, high-speed stable transport system will bring benefits of immeasurable magnitude to the region.

Hokkaido is also a valuable resource in the field of intellectual property and is one of Japan's foremost repositories of knowledge in the areas of IT and biotechnology, centered at Hokkaido University. Venture business is very active from the university, with approximately 30 venture companies created in the last 10 years in the field of biotechnology alone. Hokkaido University is developing a research and business park design, in a manner similar to what has been done by Finland's Oulu University. Additionally, Hokkaido University is working to introduce the world's fastest high-speed computing facilities, with assistance from the government, and to strengthen industry-academia cooperation via such means as joint research institutions and joint research projects with private companies.

It is not possible to overlook Hokkaido's human resources. The stable source of highly motivated people from Hokkaido University, as well as other national and public universities and high schools throughout Hokkaido, has prompted the movement of many companies to Hokkaido to utilize the abundant skilled workforce here.

Hokkaido also has sufficient capacity to support industrial requirements for land, water and electricity.

Since becoming governor, I have been surprised to find that many people do not know that Hokkaido has top-notch support plans for determining possible locations for industrial sites. In FY 2005, more than 50 companies either built large-scale plants or added new facilities to their existing operations here in Hokkaido, yet none of them were from overseas. I hope that in subsequent years we will be able to further promote the utilization of Hokkaido's rich industrial locations to foreign companies as well as domestic ones.

Conclusion

When we discuss the development of Hokkaido, we must not overlook the contributions of one visionary foreigner, Horace Capron, who contributed so much towards the improvement of this region. He was commissioned by the government to enter an undeveloped region in order to seek out and discover the potential of Hokkaido.

After a difficult exploration of the area, his only words were, "This is a land full of treasure!" Later on, he was able to fulfill his dreams and make good use of those treasures.

As much as I am amazed that a foreigner from 120 years ago was able to discover the same potential as I have, Hokkaido's treasure continues to challenge the people who wish to utilize it, and encourages the frontier spirit within people.

This land to the north challenges people and fuels their spirit. It is worth taking up the challenge to tame this "land of treasure."

I look forward to you all visiting this Land of the North, and hope that you discover new potential and rise to the challenge of this land. Perhaps, you may find it to be a temporary, or even permanent place to sooth your soul. **JS**

Takahashi Harumi is the Governor of Hokkaido.