

Citizens Participate in a World Expo for the First Time



Sending Out Grass-roots Environmental Messages

By *Okabe Hiroshi*

THE 2005 World Exposition (EXPO 2005) has got off to a steady start with star attractions such as a frozen mammoth from Siberia and humanoid robot performances drawing strong public interest. Another eye-catcher is the world's first 360-degree spherical imaging system that allows visitors to sense the energy of nature by engulfing them with huge virtual-reality Earth images. Participating in the first world EXPO of the 21st century are 121 countries as well as major Japanese businesses such as Toyota and Mitsubishi which are sending out a variety of messages for environmental preservation using state-of-the-art technologies. The EXPO are attracting all the visitors.

EXPO 2005 is also the first exposition in 150 years to give a leading role to citizens, together with governments and businesses. For example, NPOs and NGOs are staging workshops and making public reports every day on their activities aimed at environmental protection and world peace at the NGO Global Village set up at the main EXPO site.

The Whole Earth Research Institute, the organizer of nature-experience programs for schools in various parts of Japan, is sponsoring an exhibition in which huge replicas of bees and spiders – about 50 times their actual sizes – greet visitors, who are questioned how the world would look like if they were only 3 cm tall. Another exhibit showcases how harmoniously the native Japanese people, the *Ainu*, coexist with nature in Japan's

northernmost main island of Hokkaido.

On the opening day, a symposium took place to discuss the problem of "street children" in Southeast Asia. John Piermont, a former street child from the Philippines, emphasized that street children have dreams but cannot find opportunities to realize

Photo: Kyodo News



The world's first 360-degree spherical imaging system



EXPO site is lit up after dark





them. The opening-day events also included a “peace performance” with the piano that was exposed to radiation 4 km from the hypocenter of the 1945 atomic bombing in Hiroshima.

ECOPLUS, an NPO engaged in environmental education, is staging an event showcasing Japanese traditional lifestyles with nature using video footage from various parts of Japan. Gregory Michel, an American committee of the group, says it is a matter of regret that climate-based wisdom is being ignored. The organization is inviting children of indigenous people from Alaska and India to introduce their traditional cultures during the EXPO 2005.

Photo: Kyodo News



These projects participating citizens are smaller in scale than those of governments and businesses. But such grass-roots projects help to promote international exchanges at civic levels. The EXPO 2005 is a good opportunity to spur such interchanges.

There have been ups and downs in the course of developing the EXPO site with organizers being forced to change their plan due to the discovery of goshawk’s nests (the bird is an endangered species in Japan.) Maintaining bountiful forests on the EXPO site so that citizens, who are seeking to conserve the environment, can play a central role and hold nature classes is one of the organizers’ responses to the growing environmental concerns of the 21st century.

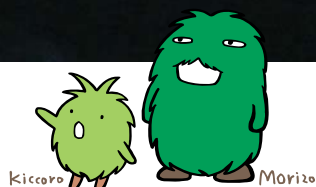
Kimura Shozaburo, the general producer of EXPO 2005 and president of Shizuoka University of Art and Culture, said in an interview:

“Since its birth in the 19th century, the world expo has sought technological civilization. But with a halt to technological advancement, a major turning point has arrived for the world expo in the 21st century. The world expo has begun to look for authentic local cultures. EXPO 2005 marks the start of such a new trend. What is particularly important is not the number of visitors but whether it can showcase new ways of life and deeply impress the people of the world.”

Citizens participating in the EXPO 2005 appear to be gradually realizing what Kimura said. **JS**

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Photo: Kyodo News



Frozen mammoth is one of the star attractions