

# ***At the End***

*Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley*



This is a *mutugoro*, better known in English as a mudskipper. They are wary little creatures that live between worlds: while having fins and gills like any other of their fishy cousins, they hop and wriggle and feed out of the water. These strange fishes are found mostly on muddy tropical shores, but the variety found in the Ariake Sea of Kyushu is the northernmost of them all. How long they will continue to survive there is a very open question.

I photographed this male mudskipper just about a year ago in Isahaya Bay, the Ariake Sea's northwesternmost extension. It was low tide out on the *gata*—the mudflats—and I was more than two kilometers seaward from the wall marking the boundary between the tide-washed plain of mud and real terra firma. As the last of the receding tide trickled back toward the bay, galaxies of little bumps and spots began to appear all around.

Each gradually grew larger and more distinct, until they took the forms of crabs and pop-eyed, hunch-backed fishes. Balancing on the wide, ski-like board used by local fishermen to slide over the mud, I raised my camera with a glacial slowness. The newly emerged mud-creatures saw my effort very differently. As if in a carefully choreographed mass movement, all those within about a four-meter radius of me swiftly plunged back into their burrows and were instantly invisible.

Faster than the movement of my camera's shutter, all life disappeared. After some minutes, the little bumps and spots reemerged and the drama began again. After repeated failures, I managed to get close because I eventually came to resemble a large lump of the surrounding mud. But now, as you read this, those watchful creatures and their intertidal world of Isahaya Bay have vanished.

In 1952, the government of a Japan still struggling with recovery from the

disaster of the Pacific War set out to turn a large portion of the shallow bay into land suitable for rice agriculture. There were local protests and demonstrations, but during the years to follow the project quietly remained on the books. As the need for rice paddies dwindled, other "objectives" for the project began to be substituted. The walled-off bay would serve as a catchment basin for fresh water, with a part of the land reclaimed to be used as pasture for beef cattle, went one. Another insisted that diking the bay was necessary for flood control. It is true that in the past 50 years over a thousand people have perished from flooding in the area, but walling off the bay to protect against floods originating in the surrounding river system would be a little like fixing a troublesome bathtub faucet by tinkering with the drainpipe.

This last March, a seven-kilometer seawall was finished, cutting off 3,550 hectares of the bay. The domain of the mudskippers is now gone. It was the last large piece of a unique coastal environment that once stretched all around the circumference of the Ariake Sea. Development and pollution had already done in much of the rest.

Looking at recent trends in this country, even an unbiased observer is forced to concede that once such construction projects begin life, and all the shady dealings that evidently accompany them are done, no power on earth can unmake them. It is indeed naive to assume that this was the only case of such behavior, and it is high time that the true welfare of the nation become the goal of public works. We have witnessed the death of an ecosystem and it should anger and sadden all of us.

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