

Down on the Waterfront

From the 9th to the 16th of June, the signatory countries of the 1971 Convention on Wetlands of International Importance Especially as Waterfowl Habitat, also known as the Ramsar treaty, held their fifth international conference in Kushiro, Hokkaido. Attended by representatives from 97 governments and 111 private bodies, the meeting focused on reviewing the role of wetlands as natural water-processing plants, and on protecting them from becoming refuse dumping grounds or landfill sites for industrial use or from other forms of destruction carried out in the name of economic development.

Unfortunately the meeting came too late to save the waterfront of Tokyo Bay. The seashore in this area, which at low tide used to attract squawking waterfowl hunting for food and boisterous youngsters searching for shells, has been bombarded by successive waves of urban development and is now covered by apartment blocks, sewage plants, business centers, sports facilities and parks. Like the new concrete jungles in other seaside cities, Tokyo has opted to build a large aquarium on its waterfront, and it has proved to be extremely popular indeed. Perhaps it is only fitting that such an artificially-built environment should also house an aquarium—in my opinion, one of the most artificial worlds in existence.

The aquarium in question is Tokyo Sea Life Park (tel.: 03-3869-5151), situated within Kasai Rinkai Park and located in front of Kasai Rinkai Koen Station on the JR Keiyo Line, 15 minutes from Tokyo Station. Open from 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. every day except Monday (with some exceptions), the aquarium's admission ticket costs ¥600 for adults and ¥200 for junior high school students; younger children can enter for free. If you get fed up with the sweltering heat of summer in Tokyo, a visit here will be refreshing, although you would be wise to avoid this trip on Saturday and Sunday.

Covering about 470,000 square

meters, this park, with its gently undulating and expansive grass, is rather unusual for a Japanese park and quite refreshing in itself. Built by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government on especially high-quality landfill materials to serve as a place of relaxation for residents, the park is scheduled for completion in a few years when it will also offer a bird sanctuary and two artificial beaches. The park's trees are still young, but give them a few years and they will look more like a forest.

In one corner of the park looms the glass dome of Tokyo Sea Life. The aquarium's main attraction is the Navigators of the Ocean area, which consists of a huge doughnut-shaped tank encircling visitors. The sight of a large school of bonito and tuna swimming through the tank in the same direction and at a high velocity can make one dizzy. When the aquarium first opened in June 1989, the fish just swam about in one place. Now the larger fish look quite majestic as they enjoy their swim around the tank.

The World Fish area features a spectacular international display of sea life from the Caribbean Sea, and the Arctic, Antarctic, Pacific, Atlantic

and Indian oceans. Perhaps you will spot a fish from the seas around your home country here. The wide selection includes Weedy Sea-dragons (which look just like seaweed) from western Australia, the Lookdown (which swims looking face down on the sea bottom) and the Northern Stargazer (which lies on its belly on the sea floor and gazes up toward the sky) from the east coast of the United States. Nature lovers will hardly notice the passage of time.

After enjoying the diversity and beauty of this marine life, you can skip the trains and travel home by boat. A private firm offers a short cruise from the park to Hinode Pier near JR Hamamatsucho Station for ¥800, while the Tokyo Mizube Cruising Line (tel.: 03-5608-8869), an auxiliary body of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, will transport you to Ryogoku via Rainbow Bridge and the Sumida River for ¥1,500. An evening cruise on Tokyo Bay is sure to blow away the unpleasant summer heat of Tokyo—for a while, at least.

Misu Ritsuko, Editor



The glass dome (above) of Tokyo Sea Life is the aquarium's only above-ground structure.

Following a lap through the inside of the aquarium (upper right), one can enjoy a meal amid illusions of sailboats.

