

Japanese embrace greenways

Urban trail solutions on the Pacific Rim: a sampler

By Robert Searns, Urban Edges, Inc.

Last August, I got an e-mail from Makoto Yokohari. Makoto is Associated Professor of Policy and Planning Studies at the University of Tsukuba (near Tokyo). He and several of his colleagues were studying greenways in North America and they were planning a trip to the U.S. They were hoping to see some of our projects in Denver and meet with a few of us here to talk about trails and greenways. Of course, we proudly led tours and displayed our best examples. I assumed that we Americans had to be on the leading edge in such matters as trails and outdoor recreation.

Based on the movies I'd seen and stories I'd heard, I was certain that greenways, trails, parks and the like were unknown to Japan. I pictured a land of wall-to-wall paving punctuated only by factories and high-rise apartments. A news photo of train conductors trying to squeeze a crowd of commuters through the doors of an already sardine-packed Tokyo-bound railcar had always stuck in my mind. That was my impression of outdoor activity in Japan.

Nonetheless, having coincidentally planned a trip to Southeast Asia, I dropped a hint to Makoto that maybe if I were to stop over in Japan he could show me around. What I was really looking forward to was a visit to a Japanese "on-sen" or traditional hot spring. I got to the hot spring, but saw and learned much more. Indeed, Japan does have outstanding trails, open spaces and parks. Bicycling and walking are major forms of transportation both within communities and as a way for commuters who ride their bikes to access transit stations. Japan, basically a mountainous country, also has significant forested regions and hiking is very popular.



Rice growing valley near Tsukuba

Makoto and one of his graduate students, Rieko Yamaguchi, graciously showed me around Tsukuba, a satellite city to Tokyo, not unlike Boulder, CO in character. We traveled mostly by bike, which was appropriate since Tsukuba has an outstanding greenway system and even a rail trail. The first thing I noticed was that the nearby hillsides remained forested. There

were also many verdant canyons. Though protected by levees, the river and stream valleys I saw were also pretty much intact. The floodplains were largely set aside for growing rice and other crops. One evening, while enjoying some locally grown food tastily prepared at a neighborhood restaurant, I learned that in Tsukuba, a number of land owners of these small but still "rural" parcels grow organic produce that is marketed through cooperatives in the Tsukuba area.



Map of Tsukuba Greenway Systems

The heart of Tsukuba's greenway system is a trail spine running through the heart of town linking the university campus, residential areas, offices, commercial centers and parks. A portion of the system is on an elevated deck crossing over streets and avoiding conflicts with traffic. The trail system is very popular and does tend to become crowded with cyclists, walkers, and joggers but is still very usable.

If you don't have a bike, no problem, you can "borrow" one at a number of automated city-run outlets. To do so, you drop a 100 Yen (\$1) coin in a slot on the handlebar. When you return the bike you attach it to locking cable that in turn releases your 100 Yen coin. If you're too lazy to return the bike, you just leave it on the trail and some enterprising kid will no doubt bring it back to the outlet to get the coin. The system seems to work very well, though Japanese ethical values no doubt pay a vital role in the success of the program.

as communities plan for trails

Another striking observation was the proliferation of roadside trails and walkways. Separate trails, even along very narrow roadways, were almost always present allowing people a safe non-motorized way to move about the community. In some cases these multi-use trails were divided from traffic by beautifully landscaped medians. In other instances, a narrow concrete curb or guardrail had to suffice, but it seemed that the bicyclist and walker was always taken into account.



Rail trail Near Tsukuba

A final surprise was the wonderful detailing of the urban trails. Surfaces ranged from inlaid stone to crushed gravel to asphalt that was painted a warm color. In many places, finely cut stone curbing was carefully laid to define the trail edges. In places I saw all kinds of natural security fencing created using vines attached to a post and wire framework—a far better look than chain link.



Trail detailing In Japan

The sight that most stayed with me, however, was the one of several large trees left standing right in the middle of a heavily used bicycle trail. Typical on our trails, if you can't go around them, the trees must be sacrificed to the trail. Not so in Tsukuba, where Rieko, my guide, explained that trees are sacred and should be preserved wherever possible. She was not aware of any cyclists running into the trees nor did I see any scars or blood. Somehow, people figured out that you just steer around them.



“Design with Nature”

As a greenway and trail builder, my short visit to Japan was an eye-opener, and I am already employing some of the ideas to solve trail design problems locally. I also learned that the value and pleasures of trails and open space are universal. In crowded Bangkok, Thailand, for example, I saw a greenway built entirely on top of an elevated deck—painted green. Indeed, when presented with a vision, people will make extraordinary efforts to create these amenities. Their efforts pay off.



Elevated greenway in Bangkok

Robert M. Searns, the founding owner of Urban Edges, Inc., a planning and development firm based in Denver, Colorado, has worked nationwide for more than 25 years on planning and development of greenways, trails, and outdoor resource projects. Bob is also a new board member for American Trails; see page 13 for more on his background.