

2020 ASAKAWA Kan'ichi Award
Student Paper Contest for International Understanding and Exchange
Junior High School / Highest Award

Think globally. Act locally.

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“The forests in Tadami Town are very beautiful. I’m very grateful that this is connected to preventing sea-level from rising in Kiribati”.

This is what Kentaro Ono from Japan-Kiribati Association said after he saw the nature in Tadami Town. I can never forget these words because he spoke about the global environmental crisis with a very calm expression.

Mr. Ono visited our Tadami Junior High School last fall. He once lived in Kiribati which is at risk from the sea-level rise and he introduced Kiribati to us in that lecture. At first he told us various stories about Kiribati culture at first, and I thought, “This country sounds like a really fun place and a nice country”. However, the atmosphere changed completely in the last half of the lecture. We watched a video of Kiribati in which the islands were almost sinking beneath the surging waves. Then he explained that Kiribati in the first half of the video was from the past and the one in the last half was Kiribati today. That story made me realize deeply the effects of global warming for the first time.

This experience sparked an interest for the students in our grade regarding the various issues facing our planet and the world are facing. The more we researched, the more we learned that the world right now has a lot of problems. Those are; racial discrimination, economic disparity, war, abnormal weather, marine pollution, the gender gap, and the list goes on and on.

I wonder if you know about the SDGs? These are international development goals, adopted by the United Nations Summit in September 2015, to realize a sustainable and better world by 2030. The goals are divided into 17 large categories. By achieving these goals, the UN intends to solve the many issues I noted above and bring the world to the future.

We believe that more people should learn about the SDGs. All the people living in the world should start doing what they can with an awareness of these issues with a sense of crisis. What are the things we can do to connect the world to the future then?

Now, I would like to introduce the initiatives that Tadami Junior High School has been implementing. Our school focused on one of the SDGs, “Life Below Water”, and has been working on learning about the ocean. It all started when students in my grade went to a beach in Niigata last summer and experienced cleaning up garbage from the ocean. As we were picking up garbage, we found out that most of it was garbage made from plastic. There were various sizes and types. To our surprise, some of the garbage originated from neighboring countries.

This prompted us from Tadami Town to participate in the Marine Education Summit held at the University of Tokyo last winter. We studied more about the ocean for the event and learned a lot about the reality.

For instance, garbage swept into the Pacific Ocean has formed a great patch as big as the whole area of Mexico, and pollution in the ocean is worsening due to domestic and industrial wastewater. It is also estimated that by 2050, there will be more litter in the ocean than fish. When we learned that, we thought about what we could do to stop ocean pollution.

Currently, Tadami Junior High School has been carrying out two activities on things we can do.

First, we are making reusable shopping bags from old newspapers. This started as an effort to reduce the use of plastic shopping bags based on the idea that if we reduce waste produced in our daily lives, we can help slow down ocean pollution. During the beach clean-up in Niigata, we found garbage made from plastic the most. Also, Japan started charging fees for plastic shopping bags at stores in July this year. This shows that plastic bags are common trash thrown away in our daily lives. In the beginning, it was only students in our grade that were making the bags, but now all the students in our school are making them. We have asked shop owners in the town to be used at their stores. We as junior high school students have also been expanding our activities by holding workshops elsewhere in the town this summer to teach people how to make them. Thanks to this, the number of people who make the newspaper shopping bags has been gradually increasing in the town. Sometimes, people send the bags they have made to our school.

Second, we make wooden badges. Students in the second grade make them by hand to get more people know about the SDGs initiatives. The badge is designed using 17 colors which represent the 17 SDGs in a circle. For the material, we use forest-thinned timber of beech trees, which is Tadami Town’s natural resource as we plan to promote one of the SDGs initiatives, “Life On Land”.

Our activities were covered by the media such as newspaper, news and radio and spread around and outside of Fukushima. We sometimes receive letters of encouragement from those who have learned our activities.

After doing these activities, I have two things I want everyone to think about.

First, it is about learning. The beach clean-up in Niigata was the beginning to our activities. And these activities made us fully aware that the global issues are “closer to home”. Because of this realization, we were able to learn and understand that marine life is in danger from litter in the ocean, that there are countries like Kiribati which are in difficult situations, and that SDGs are trying to connect the world to the future. We took actions to change these critical situations for the better even a bit. This means that learning is the first step for taking actions. People living today should learn about the reality of this world.

Secondly, it is to do what you can do. Due to the impact of COVID-19, our way of life has been changing to adopt the “New Lifestyle”. When you look at it from a different angle, it is an opportunity to change how we act. That is why I want people to become more aware of the efforts they can make right away such as saving power, separating trash, recycling resources, no matter how small they are.

If many people learn about global issues and try to do something in their daily lives, even the small effort from each person can make a huge step towards solving big issues. This will bring countries, and even, the world, and even the ocean together as one. As we believe in this, we will continue to take action. “Think globally. Act locally”.