

Contested Landscapes of Marine Sports

The Seto Inland Sea in Japan

Marine sports make use of a resource that seems to be abundant. However, in Japan, an economy where space is the most highly priced commodity, even the sea is subject to conflicting land use. The separation of specialized spaces for different sports, a general characteristic of modern sports, inhibits the participation in sports, because it imposes restrictions on the use of existing resources (like fishing harbours) and involves high costs. Marine sports in Japan can serve as an example that the separation of spaces for sports and spaces for other uses is not an ideal solution to the contest on landscape use in industrialized, densely inhabited areas, but that negotiations on common grounds might be more successful in providing spaces for sports open to a wider range of participants.

Research >
Japan

By Carolin Funck

Like other outdoor sports, marine sports, with the exception of fishing, were introduced to Japan by Western foreigners: sailing in the 1920s, surfing in the 1960s, and windsurfing in the 1970s. It was expected that, with growing prosperity, marine sports would follow the example of tennis and skiing and spread from an elite activity into a popular mass sport. Furthermore, a nation of almost 4,000 islands and with a 16,000 km coastline, Japan seems the ideal field for marine sports.

Participation rates in diving, sailing, and surfing, however, hover around the 1 per cent level. The number of pleasure boats per person is lower than in most other industrialized countries; it was not until 1996 that a Japanese team took a medal in an Olympic sailing contest. The abundance of natural spaces for marine sports has not been translated into an adequate level of activity. One obvious reason is the time budget available: marine sports require quite a long time frame to reach a usable shore and move out to the sea, but for the Japanese, that time is restricted due to long working hours and family duties. With time restricted, elements of space like access to the shore, availability of mooring facilities, and possibilities for stopover during cruising become a very decisive factor.

In sports geography, the development of modern sports has

been characterized by the separation of specific space earmarked for sports purposes and set in the context of a dislike for mixed use of space (Bale 1993:135). In marine sports, engine, wind, and waves support the movement of the body to create a wide activity radius difficult to confine. On the other hand, the sea in Japan - especially the Seto Inland Sea, which is the focus of this study - has been intensively used for transport, fishing, and land reclamation. What kind of spatial separation has occurred in this context and how does it influence participation? What are the interests in negotiating the landscapes of marine sports and who is involved in it?

From Yachts to Thunder Tribes

Participation in different marine sports shows a highly biased gender and age structure, which inhibits a wider spread as well as a common strategy of interest lobbying. Surfing is the domain of young men of around twenty; young women prefer diving, often combined with a trip abroad. On the other hand, surveys by the leading sailing magazine *Kaji* (Helm) show that compared to 1973, when 45 per cent of its readers were in their twenties, in 1999 40 per cent were in their fifties – and almost 100 per cent were male.

Marine sports operate in a continuum from leisure to sports, where the same actors share the same sites. The aspect

of competition has weakened in sailing, as membership of the Japan Sailing Federation, which is a requirement for races, has declined to 11,781 members in 2002. In contrast, an increase to 15,445 members in the Japan Surfing Federation in 2001 shows the popularity of board-based sports.

Another indicator for the structure of marine sports is the number of pleasure boats registered. Of the 439,369 boats nationwide (2001 figure), 73 per cent are motorboats used mainly for pleasure fishing. For all of these boats, only about 400 marinas are available. The number of pleasure boats per capita is above national average in the western part of Japan, especially around the Seto Inland Sea.

Sailing a yacht is said to occupy 'a particularly powerful position in both the signification of social status and the imagination of leisure' (Laurier 1999:196). As the number of yachts rose to 55,000 during the bubble economy (1988 figure), only to decline again to 27,000 in 2000, the connection to economic well-being seemed obvious. However, income data of the readers of *Kaji* suggest that yacht owners are not restricted to a particular upper class. Many keep their boats in ordinary fishing harbours where they pay bottles of sake or small amounts of money to the local fishing cooperative. When members of sailing clubs were interviewed about this difference between reality and image, their conclusion was that sailing is, after all, a three-K sport: *kitsui* (tough), *kiken* (dangerous), and *kitanai* (dirty). As long as racing is not the major purpose, costs can be reduced by avoiding places specialized for marine sports like marinas – it is the time factor that makes sailing in Japan a luxurious experience.

On the other end of the spectrum from elite to wild forms

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of sport and leisure, personal water craft (PWC) riders are called the 'thunder tribe of the sea', in reference to motorcycle gangs. When they circulate through the famous shrine gate of Miyajima in Hiroshima Bay on New Year's Day, trying under the eyes of thousands of shrine visitors to inscribe their names in the wooden structure registered as a world heritage site, this reference seems obvious. The recent rapid spread of PWCs, however, has meant a departure from its 'wild' origins of deviant conduct: municipalities have begun to hold PWC races as tourist attractions. However, as motorboat industry regulations on noise and pollution levels exist only as voluntary norms, conflicts about noise and rough behaviour have become common along the shores where they share space with swimmers and fishing nets.

Gambling with Space

Spatially, the most clearly separated and professionalized form of marine sports is motorboat racing, which is conducted in twenty-four racetracks all over Japan and draws about 60 million spectators per year laying bets on the outcome. Participants in marine sports distance themselves clearly from this official form of gambling.

The main disputes around marine leisure in the Seto Inland Sea concern places to moor, because here economic interests and traditional rights of sea use compete with sports and leisure. In Hiroshima Bay, 4,474 boats were counted in 1996, 87 per cent of which were moored illegally. During the economic boom in the late 1980s, prefectures and cities tried to create an image of an affluent lifestyle through the construction of marinas. This followed the simplistic logic of publicly promoted resort development in this period, that to provide the space would be sufficient to promote leisure and sports, neglecting cultural and social elements (Funck 1999). Kannon Marina in Hiroshima City was constructed by the prefecture on the far edge of a land reclamation project. Well equipped but extremely expensive, half of its 680 berths remain empty – a phenomenon common to public marina projects. The re-use of harbour areas that became vacant due to economic changes is a more successful public attempt to provide low-cost mooring facilities.

In the Seto Inland Sea, there is always an island within reach. However, regulations on mooring in the many small harbours are complicated. Fishing cooperatives distrust boats from outside, as pleasure fishing, often enjoyed in combination with other forms of marine sports, has severely depleted fish resources. Providing separate spaces have been promoted as a solution to conflicts such as described by Nennstiel (2001). *Umi no eki* (station by the sea), a municipal project on Ozakishimajima Island, combines a small sport harbour with a hotel, a store and an information monitor. It was criticized, however, by visiting sailors as not being adjusted to the needs of marine sports at all. Opening the harbour in front of the historic town nearby for visiting boats, they argued, would have been a far better solution.

While the administration promotes separate facilities for marine sports, participants prefer to use existing harbours, which are cheaper, easier to access, and closer to daily life on the islands. Common grounds seem to be the better solution to facilitate participation in marine sports, but require conflict management with fishing cooperatives and locals who react with caution to the unfamiliar concept of pleasure entering their space of work.

On the national level, future developments in the Seto Inland Sea are an issue of disagreement between different government agencies. This dispute mirrors wider conflicts between the priority of production, the promotion of sports as a means of social education, and the effort to develop leisure and tourism industries as an economic alternative for peripheral areas like islands. The analysis of contested landscapes of sport, such as the Seto Inland Sea, is a valuable tool that can contribute to untangle the multiple connections between sports and the societies they are played in. <

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