

Ecocon: Connecting for the Environment

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In this issue, we interviewed members of the student staff supporting the National Environmental Activities Contest for University Students held annually in Japan.

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Keita

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of 2008 Ecocon



Asuka

Student staff representative
of 2009 Ecocon

Ecocon: The National Environmental Activities Contest for University Students

Ecocon is a contest held annually since 2003 at which university clubs engaged in environmental activities compete for recognition. The main objectives of the contest are to encourage environmental clubs all over the country to share knowledge and experience and learn from each other, thereby invigorating the environmental movement among university students. Tokyo Electric Power Company co-hosts the event as part of its CSR (corporate social responsibility) programs. The two-day contest is attended by more than 1,000 people, including the student presenters. The event is planned and run by a secretariat under an executive committee made up of representatives of environment-related organizations. The secretariat, which is active throughout the year, is composed of twenty to thirty members, including students.

Q: The sixth Ecocon was held for two days in December 2008. How many groups took part in this, and could you also tell us something about the contest selection process?

Keita: Fifty-eight clubs and organizations took part. We divided the entrants into eight different groups and had them make presentations within those groups. Each group chose one of their number, and finalists were then selected by ballots cast by student participants and specialists. Final selection was held on the second day. Each group had only five minutes to present their activities. In addition to the contest, Ecocon also holds sessions featuring discussion on different themes and lectures by specialists in environmental issues. There is also an exhibition corner.



The presentations were original and inventive, some taking the form of a skit, others involving dancing, and so forth.

Q: What kinds of activities are most highly rated?

Asuka: This year, a club made up of students from eight different universities in Nagoya won the highest award. This group works together with its local movie theater to introduce reusable drinking cups, and also holds “candle nights,” calling on participants to turn off their electric lights and try using only candles for illumination. The candles were handmade using vegetable oil discarded by restaurants and the shafts of bamboo culled in the maintenance of bamboo groves.

Keita: The previous contest was won by a group that created and produced quizzes on the environment for a mobile phone website; the year before that, the winner was a group that published a free magazine introducing easy-to-understand environmental activities that are not only friendly to the environment but can be pursued in ways that are enjoyable and stylish. Environmental groups whose activities also invigorate the local community and school curriculums, and those whose work is not easily measured numerically are also highly regarded.

Asuka: The groups that take part are engaged in many different kinds of activities. Some are concerned with the problems of waste disposal, others focus on raising awareness such as through environmental education, and still others conduct environmental surveys and overseas research.

Q: Why did you become involved in Ecocon?

Keita: I wanted to get involved in some kind of activity off campus that addresses the problems of society. I am not directly involved in any sort of environmental activity myself, but I became a member of the student staff because the idea of university students planning and managing an event for university students, and of a contest on the theme of environmental issues sounded so interesting.

Asuka: Listening to environmental problems being discussed every day in the media, I began wondering what I could do. I decided to join an environmental club at my university that goes by the motto “Let’s start by doing what we can do.” We work with the university co-op, asking them to try to reduce the number of plastic bags being handed out at the cash register, and also encourage replacement of the disposable plates and dishes used to serve foods

sold at our annual school festival with those that are easier to recycle. I became a member of the Ecocon staff because I wanted to work with students from other schools and non-student activists as well.

Q: Why does the event take the form of a contest?

Keita: I myself was puzzled about the idea of competition among them when I first joined the staff. But soon I came to see that contest allows the clubs to more clearly demonstrate their strengths than might be the case if the event were just an exhibition. The clubs can also learn many things from each other's presentations.

Asuka: Before presenting their activities at Ecocon, the participating clubs find they have to review their past activities objectively and to articulate plans for the future. Many comments by participants in the contest reflect how it proved a good opportunity not only to recognize weaknesses they needed to address but to reaffirm the good things they were doing as well as to identify guideposts for future objectives. I thought the competitive format was strange at first, too, but after I heard those comments, it seemed like the right choice.

Keita: Nevertheless, rather than just having the groups compete against each other for points given for their activities, we would like our contest to stimulate the participant groups as they engage in activities the following year. For that reason Ecocon features other events, not just the selection process itself. For example, in the 2008 Ecocon, we held a group workshop after the selection process, and shared ideas about what the groups could do for their future activities. We also work actively to set up group discussions and exchange meetings.

Q: What direction would you like to see Ecocon move in the future?

Asuka: Right now we are seeing an environmentalism boom, and many environmental clubs are being organized at colleges and universities. On the other hand, people who join these environmental clubs may be seen by their friends as people who are doing something really impressive. I want such people to be seen as doing something that is perfectly ordinary. I hope that Ecocon will be an event attended and enjoyed by people who do not regularly take part in environmental activities.

Q: What have you learned from your involvement at Ecocon?

Keita: I first thought that activities such as carrying your own chopsticks rather than using disposable chopsticks, or bringing your own shopping bag rather than using store-provided plastic bags could do little to halt global warming; I wondered whether these activities are any good for the environment in the first place. But I learned that these activities don't just stop there: they get more people involved and they can help reinvigorate communities, and the impact spreads out from there. I want to be involved in environmental activities not by dealing with

environmental problems alone, but in a broader context of thinking about how all kinds of things are connected in society.

Asuka: I often hear participants in the Ecocon talk about how their thinking was changed by the students' enthusiasm or how they are glad that their own ideas are being conveyed to others. I believe that, ultimately, people are driven more by their hearts than by their heads, and I have personally begun to try to communicate my thoughts and feelings more clearly to others. I would like to be able to work in a place where even the small amount of influence I have can help improve society.



Members of the student staff.

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My favorites

好きなことば (favorite phrase)

Keita: ぜんりょくしっそう
zenryoku-shisso, going for something full speed ahead

Asuka: しこうとうてい
shiko-totei, be modest, but also ambitious

好きな色 (favorite color)

Keita: いろいろな色。その時の気持ちを表す色が好きです。
Various colors. Any color that represents my mood at particular time.

Asuka: あか ひとげんき
赤。人を元気してくれるから。
Red. Because it is a color that lifts people's spirits.

しゅみ (hobby)

Keita: スポーツ。スポーツをすることもみることも好きです。
Sports. I like to both play and watch.

Asuka: ミュージカル。「レ・ミゼラブル」が好きです。20回以上みました！
Watching musicals. My favorite is *Les Misérables*—I saw it over twenty times!