

Report on Activities of Environmental Education in Hirono Ground

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Hirono Ground, not far from Miki City in Kobe, is a site designated for environmental education and experimental organic agriculture for use by Konan university students. Activities such as rice planting, harvesting, and threshing give city people, young people whose lives lack the rural experiences of traditional Japanese life, a sense of what it means to be close to nature. Along with the official curriculum, in which farming and ecological restoration is carried out, along the margins, other forms of relating to place happen. Things like collecting insects and frogs, playing near a pond or gathering acorns. This weekend I got a chance to explore this place from the vantage point of my kids, Caroline and Lucy. They set out about finding the frogs that live in the farmlands near Miki, on a warm early November weekend.

"Amagaeru"-- a bright green peppermint of a frog was the first one found. Others, small as buttons, consented to be picked up and put to swim across a small pond. "Tsuchigaeru," a slightly larger earth-coloured, mottled frog, seemed even more resistant to the stresses and strains of being carried about and didn't seem to want to leave their hands. Lucy showed me hands brimming and overflowing with frogs; she squealed with the sensation of having four squirmy reptiles on her skin. Caroline preferred to take them one at a time, giving them names and trying to recapture the same one she had seen earlier. It was hard to say goodbye to a frog you knew might be snug underground the next time we came, but we left them close to where we first found them, with the small-frog shaped vacuum within our hearts having been temporarily filled up.

As a child I loved to collect frogs. We would find them near a pond not far from the house, and bring them back in a bucket to keep as pets. The frogs always disappeared mysteriously during the night. I suspect now that my parents, not wishing to contribute to this form of animal abuse, secretly freed them. One of my favorite poems at the time was this one by Hilaire Belloc:

Be kind and tender to the frog
and do not call him names,
like Slimy-Skin or Toad-Gone-Wrong
or Billy Bandy-Knees.

The frog is justly sensitive to epithets like these.

As a frog lover, it was hard to imagine why anyone would give such nasty names to this adaptable little creature. but I enjoyed the rhymes and the sound of the froggy nicknames on my lips, so the poem never left me. My children learned to recite Belloc's frog poem for themselves. The poem ends with this mock heroic sentiment: "No animal will more repay a treatment kind and fair/or so lonely people say who keep a frog/and by the way, they are extremely rare."

In *The Geography of Childhood* Gary Paul Nabhan and Stephen Trimble discuss "why children need wild places." Caroline and Lucy would answer, "because they're fun." And I would add, that being fun, these that these encounters with the wild in the guise of frogs will never be forgotten and thus have the power to move mountains. Or let me rephrase that: the power to let mountains be, and to have respect for wild things when all other forces in the universe seem to be intent on dislodging them.