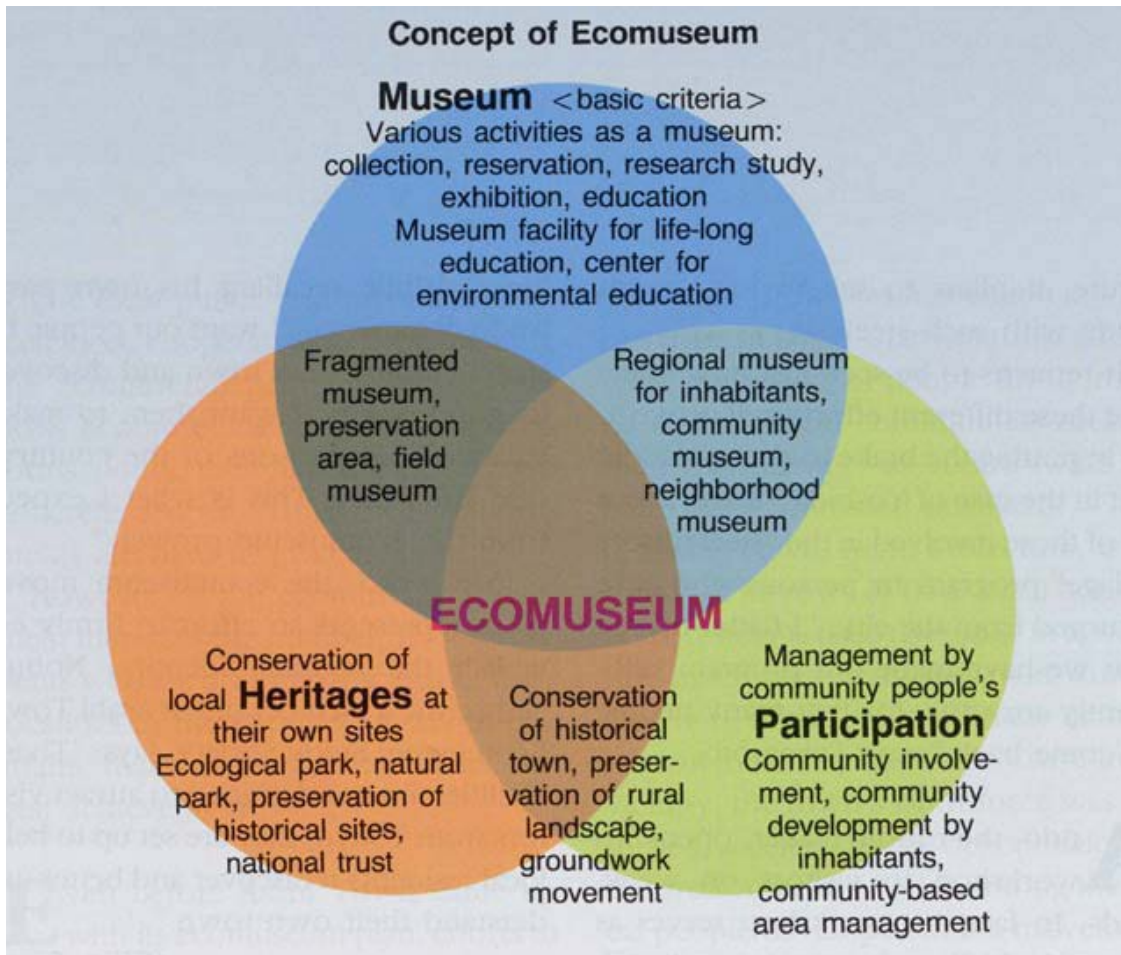


The Image of 'Ecomuseum' in Japan

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The term "ecomuseum" refers to ecological activities that aim to develop an entire region as a living museum. An ecomuseum embodies three elements: (1) the preservation of various kinds of heritage, including nature and cultural and industrial traditions, in a given region, (2) the management and operation of these with the participation of local residents for the sake of their own futures, and (3) the function of the preserved nature and traditions as a museum. Ideally, as shown in the diagram, the three elements of "heritage," "participation" and "museum" should be well balanced and constitute a closely integrated whole.



In Japan today, there are only a few cases in which the three elements interact on an equal footing. But many regions are now striving to build ecomuseums that achieve this ideal balance. One example is Asahi Town, Yamagata Prefecture, where the local environment with its abundance of nature is being used both as raw learning material and as a place of study.

At present, ecomuseum projects with various themes - not limited to the natural environment - are being implemented in many regions. Among the themes are "agriculture" (Tomiura Town, Chiba Prefecture), "health education based on medicinal herbs" (Shimabara City, Nagasaki Prefecture), "villa resort culture" (Karuzawa Town, Nagano Prefecture) and "Spiritual Home: Ihatov" (a reference to a utopia described by the poet Kenji Miyazawa; Towa Town, Iwate Prefecture).

While the local people may not refer to them as "ecomuseum" projects, many interesting local community activities, with elements that qualify them as such, are to be found in various parts of Japan. These range from local residents' efforts to protect their land and mountains to campaigns to preserve rows of traditional houses. All such efforts contain elements of heritage and participation, so if museology is added, they easily qualify as full-fledged ecomuseum projects.

Japan's diverse ecomuseum activities share three common problems.

First, their ties with museums and museology are weak. Regrettably, most museums in Japan function more as facilities for attracting tourists than for enriching the lives of local people. What is more, some people connected with museums regard these projects merely as local development efforts that have nothing to do with museums. This explains the difficulty of fostering smooth cooperation between the ecomuseum proponents and those connected with museums.

Second, the relevance of such activities to regional development through tourism tends to be overemphasized. In too many instances, ecomuseum projects are initiated primarily to boost tourism and local industries. These goals do not always square with the principles of ecomuseums.

Third, there is not enough participation by local people and community-based organizations. As things stand, it is local governments that are spearheading most ecomuseum efforts in Japan and there are hardly any cases in which ecomuseum campaigns are led by local residents, as is, for example, the case with Europe. In the final analysis, this is attributable to a difference in the form of democracy and poses a major problem for the future of ecomuseum activities in Japan. Meanwhile, some local governments are joining hands to undertake ecomuseum plans in what may be called large experiments transcending the conventional framework of Japan's administrative systems.

In France, the birthplace of the ecomuseum movement, the first ecomuseum was established in the early 1970s as a local natural park. Later, various proposals were put forward by local communities and then urban areas, gradually to take concrete shape. Today, different regions in France have diverse ecomuseums with characteristics unique to each.

It is only in the last 10 years that the "ecomuseum" began to be noticed in Japan. But unlike the way ecomuseums developed in France, Japan has spawned one ecomuseum plan after another in a very short time, with each now groping for clues as to what the local community ought to be like and in what direction it should proceed.

Just as with our universe, which is said to be constantly expanding, it is difficult to grasp the direction and final shape of the world of ecomuseums. In fact, even France, which boasts 20 years of experience in this sphere, has yet to "complete" its ecomuseums. What is important is not that local people deliberately seek to make a particular ecomuseum, but that the local community as a whole gradually takes on the nature of ecomuseum as a result of its residents earnestly exploring what their ecomuseum should be like.