

WINTER WONDERLAND

COURTESY OF YOSHIO TSUKIO

Professor Yoshio Tsukio paddles a sea kayak through drift ice off the Shiretoko Peninsula

The Japanese archipelago extends 3,000 kilometers from north to south and is divided into east and west by mountains—the Pacific side and Sea of Japan side. The climate thus differs considerably from region to region. The four seasons are distinct as winters are extremely cold and snowy, especially in Hokkaido and the Tohoku and Joshinetsu regions, while it is warm in Okinawa and the other southwestern islands. The average temperature in Rikubetsu-cho, a town in eastern Hokkaido called the coldest place in Japan apart from Mt. Fuji, in January averages -11.4°C . In contrast, the average January temperature on Hateruma island, Okinawa Prefecture is 19.2°C . This makes for a 30-degree difference from north to south. Moreover, in summer, the highest temperature in Rikubetsu-cho sometimes reaches 30°C , so the temperature difference is very wide between winter and summer.

In the variety of climates, different customs and cultures have been developed in Japan in accordance with the seasons and regions. This month's Cover Story is all about Japan's harsh winter.



The Sea of Okhotsk, known for its sea ice in the winter, lies along the northeastern coast of Hokkaido. Drift ice is observed from the coast in mid-January and comes close to towns along the coast from late-January to early February. The ice measures 40–50 cm thick.

“From nowhere else other than the Okhotsk coast of Hokkaido can drift ice be observed at a low lati-

Each year more than two million people from home and abroad visit the Sapporo Snow Festival, where more than 200 snow and ice statues are displayed. The 64th festival will be held February 5–11, 2013.

tude and from a short distance,” says Yoshio Tsukio, professor emeritus at the University of Tokyo.

Professor Tsukio specializes in media policy and systems engineering and is a pioneer in information technology (IT) in architectural design. He is also active in the fields of regional development and environmental conservation, and advises on regional development in Hokkaido and Tohoku. He enjoys kayaking and cross-country skiing, and is a so-called Cape Horner—someone who has paddled through a route around Cape Horn, the tip of South America, known as one of the most challenging nautical routes.

Local people have regarded drift ice as a nuisance obstructing their fishing, but in recent years the ice has become the main attraction in the winter. Many tourists from home and abroad join cruises on ice-breaking ships on the Sea of Okhotsk from late-January to late-March. Walking on drift ice guided by fishermen on their winter break has become popular among tourists in recent years.

“In Japan there are now events taking advantage of the snow and low temperatures in a number of places. The Japanese have used snow and cold through the ages not only for tourism but also for their lives,” Professor Tsukio says. “Their ingenuity is especially reflected in the processing of food. Some preserved foods for the winter have been passed down through the generations and many people consume them.”

Since cold weather curbs the growth of bacteria and leads to good sake, many of the areas in which sake is produced are known to be very cold. *Kanten*

(Japanese agar), a preserved food made from *tengusa* algae, and *koridofu* (frozen bean curd), which is often used in cooked dishes, are traditional Japanese foods whose ingredients are frozen and dried in the win-



Professor Yoshio Tsukio

ter. In *Ojiya-chijimi* and *Echigo-jofu*, fabric-making techniques inscribed on UNESCO’s list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, fabric is placed on snow-covered fields to brighten the colors in the final stage of their processing. Fabric laid upon snow is a traditional scene heralding the arrival of spring in the region (see pp 18-19).

The winter cold is indispensable to some traditional crafts. The process of making *washi* (traditional Japanese paper) involves the use of cold water in the winter. In a dyeing method called *yuzenzome*, which is practiced in Kyoto and Kanazawa, dyed fabric was put in cold river water in the winter to remove extra starch and dye. This technique, called *yuzen nagashi*, was a common sight in these cities in winter.

“The human race used its ingenuity to overcome difficulties in winter before it invented the products of modern civilization. Part of its ingenuity was learning to use the forces of nature, including snow and cold,” Professor Tsukio says. “And this ingenuity is not just something inherited from the past. It is important to rethink Japanese culture associated with winter and snow in this age of the environment.”



The 25th Showa-Shinzan International Yukigassen competition will be held in Sobetsu in southwest Hokkaido on February 23 and 24. This competition is said to be the largest yukigassen (snowball fight) in the world. Strict rules have been set and yukigassen has changed from just play into a sporting event. Last year around 150 teams and 1,500 people, who won preliminary games nationwide, participated in the competition, and over 600 people from about 70 countries and areas outside Japan have participated since the competition began.



COURTESY OF SHOWA-SHINZAN INTERNATIONAL YUKIGASSEN EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE