Reflection: Thoughts on Hokkaido. An experiential learning trip to Japan (ANT 414)

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Source: Young Anthropology – Undergraduate Student Journal of Anthropology
Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 30 (Fall 2019).

Published by: The Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto Mississauga
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An experiential learning trip in Japan (ANT 414)

By Lydia Clarke Rehman

Visiting Hokkaido, Japan this past October, 2019 marked one of the most humbling educational experiences. I am truly grateful to have participated and travelled with my peers and colleagues. The title of the course (ANT 414) and its integrated experiential learning experience sparked my initial interest in the trip: “Plants, People and Prehistory.” My prior knowledge in archaeobotany was minimal and this opportunity allowed me to learn an understudied, new subfield of anthropology. This trip deepened and broadened my understanding of anthropology.

This trip was largely based on learning about the Ainu. The Ainu are the Indigenous people of Northeastern Japan. We learned about the issues surrounding this diminishing population. We went to many museums, such as Nibutani Ainu Culture Museum and the Saru River Museum. These museums illustrate how the Ainu would have lived their traditional life. It was amazing to see the settlement patterns and cultural traditions, such as ceremonial clothing, dwellings, and cultivated plants of this population. I have gained a broader perspective of the Ainu’s ways of living over the last hundred years, and the cultural traditions that have been carried forward to today. The Ainu are a marginalized group, who have faced years of assimilation, prejudice and discrimination.

The Ainu living in Japan today struggle to receive proper legislative rights from the Japanese government. Learning this was vital because the Ainu of Japan are a largely unknown people. Taking time and learning more about them from Indigenous elders and activists – as our group in Japan did –brings attention to the issues Indigenous peoples face globally. Naturally, we grew an appreciation for the parallels between the Indigenous people of Japan and Canada.

At Hokkaido University, where we were introduced to welcoming, talented students. They were ineliminable from making our experience in Japan enjoyable and enriching. On campus, we were able to visit Sakushu-Kotoni-Gawa River Site, an archaeological site that had been occupied by the predecessors of the Ainu. The plant remains found on this site are currently being analyzed in the lab. Being able to visit the site provides a wonderful context for completing research projects in archaeobotany and anthropology.

Throughout the duration of the trip, I was able to explore life in Japan, visiting different regions such as Otaru, Ebetsu, Nibutani. These collectively showcased a variety of museums to gain a deeper understanding of the history and archaeology in Japan. I was able to immerse myself in Japanese culture and food, alongside a wonderful group of peers, support staff and a phenomenal professor, Dr. Gary Crawford. Notably, Professor Crawford gave us insight into the importance of archaeobotany and why learning more about the relationships between plants and people is both enriching and significant.