Contested Landscapes of Marine Sports: The Seto Inland Sea in Japan

Marine sports make use of a resource that seems to be abundant. However, in Japan, an economy where space is the most highly priced commodity, even the sea is subject to conflicting land use. The separation of specialized spaces for different sports, a characteristic of modern sports, inhibits the participation in sports, because it imposes restrictions on the use of existing resources, inhibits the participation in sports, because it imposes restrictions on the use of existing resources, and spaces for other uses is not an ideal solution to the contest on landscape use in industrialized, densely inhabited areas, but that negotiations on common grounds might be more successful in providing spaces for sports open to a wider range of participants.

By Carolin Funck

Like other outdoor sports, marine sports, with the exception of fishing, were introduced to Japan by Western foreigners: sailing in the 1850s, surfing in the 1860s, and windsurfing in the 1970s. It was expected that, with growing prosperity, marine sports would follow the example of tennis and skiing and spread from an elite activity into a popular mass sport. Furthermore, a nation of about 128 million people living on a 36,000-km coastline, Japan seems the ideal field for marine sports. Participation rates in diving, sailing, and surfing, however, hover around the 1 percent level. The number of pleasure boats per person is lower than in most other industrialized countries; it was not until 1986 that a Japanese team took a medal in an Olympic sailing contest. The abundance of natural spaces for marine sports has not been translated into an adequate level of activity. One obvious reason is the time budget available. Japanese marine sports require quite a long time frame to reach a usable shore and move out to the sea, but for the Japanese, that time is restricted due to long working hours and family duties. With time restricted, the Japanese are space-ace to the extent of making available mooring facilities, and possibilities for stopover during cruises become a very decisive factor. In sports geography, the development of modern sports has been characterized by the separation of specific space earmarked for sports use and set in the context of a dislike for mixed use of space (Bale 1993:313). In marine sports, engine, wing, and waves support the movement of the body to create a wide activity radius difficult to confine. On the other hand, the sea in Japan - especially the Seto Inland Sea, which is the focus of this study - has been extensively used for transportation, fishing, and land reclamation. What kind of spatial separation has occurred in this context and how does it influence participation? What are the interests in negotiating the landscape of marine sports and who is involved in it?

From Yachts to Thunder Tribes

Participation in different marine sports shows a highly biased gender and age structure, which inhibits a wider spread as well as a common strategy of interest lobbying. Surfing, diving, and sailing remain male dominated sports. Women prefer diving, often combined with a trip abroad. On the other hand, surveys by the leading sailing magazine Kaji (Helm) show that compared to 1975, when 45 percent of its readers were women, by 1999, women made up 10 percent of the readership - and almost 100 percent were male. Marine sports operate in a continuum from leisure to sports, where the same actors share the same sites. The aspect of competition has weakened in sailing, as membership of the Japan Sailing Federation, which is a requirement for races, has declined to 11,758 members in 2002. In contrast, an increase to 17,149 members in the Japan Surfing Federation in 2001 shows the popularity of board-based sports. Another indicator for the structure of marine sports is the number of pleasure boats registered. Of the 44,359 boats nationwide (2001 figures), 73 percent are motorboats used mainly for pleasure fishing. For all of these boats, about 400,000 are available. The number of pleasure boats per capita is above national average in the western part of Japan, especially around the Seto Inland Sea.

Sailing a yacht is said to occupy a particularly powerful position in both the signification of social status and the imagina- tion of leisure (Lauter 1999:196). As the number of yachts owned in Japan has increased from 40,000 in 1976 to 120,000 in 2000, the connection to eco- nomic well-being seemed obvious. However, income data of the readers of Kaji suggest that yacht owners are not restricted to the upper class, and there is a trend of increasing participation by the working class, which makes sailing in Japan a luxurious experience. On the other end of the spectrum from elite to wild forms...