

The Otaru Canal Preservation Association

The formation of the Otaru Canal Preservation Association in 1973 marked a turning point in the city's identity, transitioning Otaru from a fading commercial port to a historical city that balances conservation and urban development. In the mid-1960s, a proposal to reclaim Otaru Canal for a new road caused public outcry and led to an influential preservation movement. Local efforts ultimately saved much of the canal and prompted discussions at a national level about how preserving urban heritage can revitalize communities. A collection of posters, banners, news articles, and other paraphernalia generated by the movement are periodically displayed at the Otaru Museum.

City in decline

During wartime, government regulations shifted the focus of economic activity in Hokkaido to Sapporo. The banks that had once earned Otaru its reputation as the economic center of Hokkaido began to withdraw. Around the same time, the main source for the nation's energy needs shifted from coal to oil, and Otaru subsequently lost its status as a major coal shipping port. Other ports along the southeast coast of Hokkaido provided more convenient shipping routes to Tokyo, and road and rail transport eventually surpassed shipping for cargo transportation. Otaru's economy stagnated, and by the mid-1950s it was known as a "city in decline."

Grassroots preservation efforts

The barges that once plied the Otaru Canal were slowly decaying, and silt accumulated in the unused waterways; the old warehouse buildings remained standing only for a lack of money or incentive to tear them down. In 1966, in an effort to boost the economy, the local government proposed a new six-lane road to ease congestion and improve truck access to the port. The Otaru Canal Landfill Project proposed filling in the canal and demolishing the surrounding warehouses. This galvanized a group of residents to form the Otaru Canal Preservation Association. Across the city, shops, cafés, and restaurants displayed posters that highlighted the architectural and cultural heritage that could be lost and positioned Otaru Canal as an intrinsic part of Otaru's identity.

Changing fortunes

The efforts of the Association failed to gain traction at first: the local government was unwilling to compromise and gaining support for preservation based solely on the canal as a nostalgic symbol was largely unsuccessful. However, in the late 1970s, new members with fresh ideas joined the campaign and developed a plan to revitalize the city through tourism, using the canal and stone-clad warehouses as the main assets. This won the support of local businesses and received widespread media attention. It became a community campaign to develop Otaru's economy. In the early 1980s, the government agreed on a plan to narrow some sections of the canal to make way for the planned road, while adding attractive walkways and street lights to the remaining parts. Now, tourism far outstrips freight as the driver of the local economy. Otaru's preservation movement saved much more than a canal.