

The Mixed Bathing Project

The future of *konyoku*

One distinctive feature of the hot springs in Towada-Hachimantai National Park is the large number of mixed baths (*konyoku-buro*). The hot springs' original visitors – local farmers who came with their families to relax in the off-season – had fewer inhibitions about piling into baths packed with people of both sexes. People nowadays are used to bathing alone or in sex-segregated baths. They can feel uneasy about bathing with strangers, let alone strangers of the opposite sex. They are often unacquainted with the local therapeutic hot-spring inn culture, and why that has resulted in the persistence of mixed bathing in this part of Japan. This difference in attitudes poses an existential challenge for the Towada-Hachimantai area's long-standing mixed-bathing culture.

It was to address this challenge that the Ministry of the Environment launched the Mixed Bathing Project in November 2021. The project's goal is to preserve the culture of therapeutic hot-spring bathing, of which mixed bathing is such an important element, by working with Towada-Hachimantai's hot-spring inn proprietors and other stakeholders to analyze and address the problems that mixed baths currently face.

There is no simple “one size fits all” solution to the problem. To the timid bather, a small or indoor mixed bath will be more unnerving than a large or outdoor one. Baths with transparent water are less comfortable than those with milky water. Different baths may need different solutions.

Even before the Mixed Bathing Project, all the inns in Towada-Hachimantai National Park had made modifications to help female patrons feel more at ease, such as shielding the entrance to mixed baths so that by the time women emerged into the communal bath, they were already submerged up to their necks.

Of course, the simplest solution would seem to be to get all patrons to cover up in the bath, but there is resistance to that idea too. Many patrons don't want to be forced to wear anything; according to surveys, they feel strongly that bathing in the nude is natural. There are also hygiene issues associated with people bringing their own swimwear.

At the same time, the idea of covering up in the bath is not completely foreign to Japanese culture. From old pictures, we can see that women sometimes wore diaphanous robes and got the men they hired to scrub their backs to wear a blindfold. There is even a Japanese word – *yuamigi* – for modesty garments worn in mixed baths.

Less nudity, more customers?

So what practical steps has the Mixed Bathing Project taken so far? In the first year of the project, the Ministry of the Environment identified Sukayu Onsen, the largest of the hot-spring inns in Towada-Hachimantai National Park, as the ideal test site because of its gigantic and nationally renowned indoor mixed bath. Based on discussions with the Ministry, special *yuamigi* days were introduced for that bath, when all patrons, male and female, would have to wear the garments during specified times. According to surveys conducted by the Ministry, the experiment yielded positive results. Women and couples started coming in greater numbers, creating a lively, uninhibited atmosphere similar to the old days when the bath was full of folksy farmers. As well as continuing with the *yuamigi*-day experiment at Sukayu, in the second year of the project the Ministry began exploring ways to make mixed baths more accessible through solutions other than the wearing of *yuamigi*. Since the third year the Ministry has been seeking to educate the public about the value of the culture surrounding therapeutic hot springs and the importance of preserving mixed bathing.