

What being an ama means: The issues, challenges and efforts



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Ama divers are generally women who die to collect shellfish and seaweed. In 2008, there was a total 1,390 Ama divers in Japan and 647 Ama divers in Mie Prefecture, most of whom were located on the Shima Peninsula (Mie Prefectural Board of Education, 2020). On January 23rd 2014, Ama divers in Mie Prefecture were the first in the country to be designated as a prefectural intangible traditional cultural property with their traditional skills such as 'ethnic knowledge', 'beliefs', 'resource management' and 'diving techniques' being designated by Mie Prefecture as a prefectural cultural property. Additionally, in 2017, Ama divers were designated as a national intangible traditional cultural property (The Nippon Foundation, 2023). The main catches of Ama divers include abalones, turban shells, seaweeds such as wakame and arame, lobsters, sea urchins and others. Resource management such as harvesting restrictions and the release of seedlings has been carried out for sustainable use of these resources. The Mie Prefecture Fisheries Regulation stipulates that abalones smaller than 10.6 cm must not be harvested, and abalones are prohibited from being fished from 15 September to 31 December as this is the time when abalones are spawning. In addition, in order to regulate the size of abalones that are being harvested, divers go out with 'sunboo' to measure the size of abalones at sea and return the small ones back to the sea (Ama Diver Research, Mie University, 2021).

Photo: Ama divers in Sugashima Island © Megumi Kodera

Location:
Sugashima Island, Mie Prefecture, Japan

Ecosystem type:
Marine

Main gear:
Dive, Kaginomi, Isoglassrs, Tambo

Target species:
Sea bream, sea bass, Spanish mackerel, bonito, flatfish, black rockfish, bigeye mackerel, horse mackerel, sardine, mackerel, Japanese spiny lobster, abalone, turban shell, sea urchin, octopus, Wakame, arame

Vessel type:
None

No. of small-scale fishers:
1326



Ama divers have a long history, with archaeological studies suggesting that they existed as early as 3,000 years ago. They have also appeared in the Manyoshu, the oldest anthology of poems from the 8th century. In the Edo period (1600-1868), they became the subject of ukiyo-e woodblock prints (Sugiyama, 2013).



Ama divers' fishing operations in the Shima Peninsula region include 'funado', in which men and women fish together; 'noriai', in which several Ama divers board one boat and fish separately in different fishing grounds; and 'kachido', in which Ama divers swim from land to fish.

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Located approximately 3km east of Toba Port, Suga Island's main industry is fishing. Suga Island is known as an area with many divers, along with the Ousatu area in Toba City and the Wagu area in Shima Town, Shima City (Association for the Future of Suga Island, 2024). The 'Shirongo Festival' is held in the area, during which Ama divers compete for the first abalone harvest that is dedicated to a shrine as they pray for a good catch and safety. The festival is held in July of each year (Asahi Newspaper Digital, 2023).

Justice in context

Types of justice:

- Distributive
- Social
- Economic
- Market
- Infrastructure/wellbeing
- Regulatory
- **Procedural**
- Environmental
- COVID-19 related
- **Gender injustice**

Sources:

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Despite being a developed country, Japan is far from achieving gender equality, with a low gender gap ranking of 125 as of 2023 (World Economic Forum, 2023). This is also true in the fisheries industry, where the number of female fishers engaged in offshore work is around 10%. Women represent only 5.2% of the total number of regular members of fishing cooperatives and 0.5% of the total number of officers (Fisheries Agency, 2021), making it difficult for their voices to be heard.

While Ama divers have been present since ancient times, with the Shima Peninsula area in particular known as the centre of Ama culture in Japan (Tsukamoto, 2019), there are gender-related issues such as male dominance, seniority systems, as well as the low participation in decision-making processes, etc., as the general female fishers face in Japan (Personal communication, March 5, 2024). In addition, the environment in which Ama divers operate faces severe challenges, such as a decline in fishing resources, an aging population, and a lack of successors, all of which contribute to a decrease in the number of Ama divers (Toba City, 2022). Working conditions could also count. Although in some places Ama divers rest in 'divers huts', there are no such huts on Suga Island, so these women have to travel back and forth between their homes and the fishing grounds.

Definition of small-scale fisheries

Generally referred to as coastal fisheries, small-scale fisheries in Japan are characterized by commutable distances from fishing ports (within a day). According to the official definition from Annual Statistics on Fishery and Aquaculture Production, coastal fisheries include non-fishing-vessel fisheries, fisheries with non-powered fishing vessels or with powered fishing vessels less than 10 tons, set-net fisheries and beach seine fisheries.



"I feel that being an ama is a way of being independent and coexistent within nature and society as part of life at home and at work. Other than being a mother, wife, and daughter-in-law, what I can do as a woman in a fishing community is to take care of the local fisheries sustainably through a trial-and-error process. I want to build a future where I could bequeath to subsequent generations a smile on their faces, saying "Itadaki-Masu" (thank you for the meal) at a table loaded with fresh seafood in season from the ocean in front of them (Li and Namikawa, 2020, p. 462).



Dealing with justice

Sources continued:

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The Equal Employment Opportunity Law and the Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society are currently being developed. In addition, the 'Treasure of the Sea: Fisheries Women's Vigour Project' is an initiative to increase the presence of women in the fisheries and fishery industry. The initiative is also pushing for a reform of the fisheries to make it easier for women to work and to improve the attractiveness of the fisheries so it can become an enticing job opportunity.

Individuals like Megumi Kodera, a fisherwoman from Sugashima, Toba, a member of the Mie Prefecture Federation of Fisheries Cooperatives Women's Group, are also trying to turn the tide. While working as a diver, she is also involved in various activities to improve the status of women in the fishing industry. Examples of her activities include participating in cooking classes that promote eating fish, being one of the leaders of activities that promote eating fish in Mie Prefecture, and working towards the branding of seafood caught by Ama divers so that seaweed can be a stable source of income.

Note: Ama divers in this chapter refer to female ama divers.



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Photo: Ama collecting seaweed in Sugashima Island © Megumi Kodera