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Editorial: Rural lessons to be shared from neighbors a world apart

There are no magic solutions, but efforts are underway in Japan to help rural communities. The government, in fact, has declared that mission to be a national priority.

On the other side of the world from the Midlands, the picturesque Japanese village of Tsuwano lies nestled against tree-covered mountains.

Visitors to the community of 7,600 can stop at sites including former samurai residences and — unusual for rural Japan — two Catholic churches. The village, in a time zone 15 hours ahead of Central time, arose 700 years ago around a now-vanished castle.

In the 21st century, Tsuwano unfortunately is struggling to sustain itself. Many of the challenges will sound familiar to Nebraskans and Iowans in rural communities:

Economic difficulties. An aging population. An outflow of young people to urban areas. Decreased attachment to and understanding of local history and heritage.

Tsuwano was home to 11,000 residents in the mid-1990s but has lost ground since then. Between 2000 and 2015, the population declined by 28 percent.

Consider a demographic comparison with Midlands communities with populations roughly equal to Tsuwano's:

In Blair, residents 65 and older make up 15 percent of the population. The figure for York is 18 percent; for McCook and Nebraska City, 19 percent. In Atlantic, Iowa, 22 percent of residents are 65 and older.

In Tsuwano, the number of residents 65 or older is far higher — 45 percent.

For that centuries-old Japanese village, it's crucial that elderly residents receive adequate support for health care and other needs and that enough working-age residents are retained to sustain the economy.

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The Japan Society, a century-old New York City-based organization that promotes U.S.-Japanese dialogue, reached out this year to the University of Nebraska's Rural Futures Institute to host five Japanese specialists in rural development.

The Japanese specialists visited Nebraska last month, describing their efforts and learning about rural-focused initiatives in Nebraska. They will also have rural-focused discussions with specialists and community leaders from Ohio and West Virginia.

NU's Rural Futures Institute is the only higher education organization invited to participate in this cross-national initiative — an indicator of the institute's reputation as a respected center for rural-issues analysis and collaboration.

Kenji Hayashi, one of the five Japanese visitors, described to The World-Herald how a nonprofit he co-founded helps Tsuwano's high school students learn about local needs and get involved in projects to address them.

There is a "sense of crisis" about rural challenges in Tsuwano and similar Japanese communities, he said. Residents of Tsuwano initially were leery of his nonprofit's efforts, he said, but people responded positively as young people began to show understanding of community needs.

Rural leaders and specialists from Nebraska and several other states will visit Japan next year to learn and to share ideas, said Betty Borden, who oversees collaborative U.S.-Japanese projects for the Japan Society.

"The heart of what we're trying to do is give people the opportunity to meet and see things for themselves," she told The World-Herald, "with the hope that it will inspire them to think in new ways about the challenges they're working on."

Learning about rural conditions in other countries can help NU's Rural Futures Institute as it works with Nebraska communities across the state, said Connie Reimers-Hild, the institute's associate executive director.

Japan and the Midlands have begun what should be a fruitful conversation, learning about their common rural challenges. This commendable dialogue, facilitated by NU, offers much potential benefit for both nations.

http://www.omaha.com/opinion/editorial-rural-lessons-to-be-shared-from-neighbors-a-world/article_027e8fb3-4802-5002-9dde-3a0dbe5a3e25.html