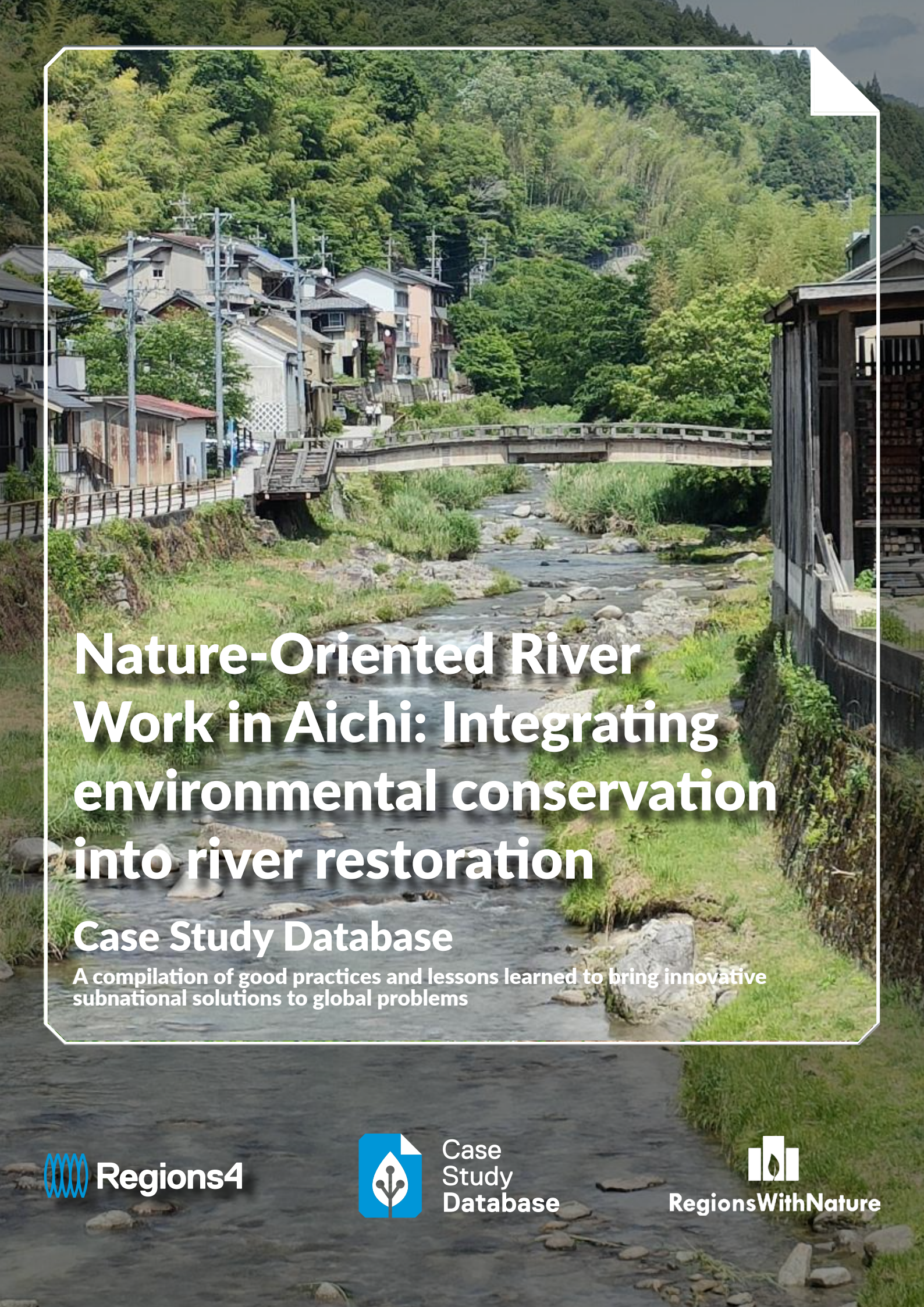

Nature-Oriented River Work in Aichi: Integrating environmental conservation into river restoration

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Introduction

In recent years, the intensification of climate change has exacerbated the frequency and severity of natural disasters, making flood control a matter of critical global importance.

Traditionally, flood management strategies in Japan have relied heavily on the construction of robust concrete embankments to regulate river flow and mitigate flooding risks. However, recognizing the need for more sustainable and environmentally integrated solutions, Japan has shifted its conventional flood control methods towards a more holistic approach.

This new paradigm emphasizes the importance of preserving ecosystems and fostering coexistence with nature, aligning flood management efforts with the principles of biodiversity conservation.

Project Summary

The Aichi Prefectural Government is leading the "Nature-Oriented River Work" project since 1991. Aichi has adapted national guidelines to its region by using traditional construction methods with natural materials like rocks, wood, and soil, to reinforce riverbanks and restore habitats for plants, animals, and aquatic species while preserving the unique character of each river.

The project involves experts, the government, and residents to design river improvements that reflect both ecological and cultural values.

The goal is to ensure river restoration not only supports biodiversity but also enhances local lifestyles and landscapes.

Key Information

Location
Aichi Prefecture, Japan

Areas of Focus
Ecosystem Restoration

Founded
1991

Sustainable Development Goals addressed
SDGs 11 and 15.

Targets of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework addressed
Targets 12.

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BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

In Japan, where about 70% of the land is covered by mountains, the rain that falls on the ground runs down the steep terrain so quickly that many of the rivers formed by this rainfall are fast-flowing and not wide. Average annual rainfall (about 1,700 mm) is about twice the world average, with rainfall concentrated during the rainy season and typhoons. As a result, the rivers are in a condition that is more prone to flooding than rivers in other countries. Therefore, flood control has long been considered very important in Japan, and flood control works have been carried out on many rivers.

In the modern era, the previous River Act was enacted in 1896 with the principle of keeping floodwaters within the river channel and allowing them to flow down to the sea as quickly as possible. One of the main focus of the law was to drain water quickly and prevent levees from breaking, and the main construction method was to use sturdy concrete to protect riverbanks and levees.

However, the river environment does not consist only of flowing water. It also includes the water surface and the surrounding land, such as the riparian zone, all of which interact with each other. In other words, the river environment is connected vertically from upstream to downstream, and also horizontally between the river and the surrounding land. These vertical and horizontal connections have a significant impact on each other's ecosystem and surrounding environment.

From this perspective, it has become clear that covering the stream channel with concrete leads to a significant reduction in the natural riparian area, breaks up the connection to the surrounding land, and, as a result, creates an environment that is difficult for native organisms to inhabit due to the loss of the natural environment in not a few parts of the river.

This view has spread to the general public, and in 1995, the Aichi Prefectural Government conducted a public opinion survey entitled *"Urban and River Development in the 21st Century."* This survey showed strong support for the opinions that "the river should be wide enough to provide space for living organisms" and that "even if the area of urban land use is reduced, riparian forests should be conserved and even restored."

Situation in Japan: Establishment of "Basic Guidelines for the Nature-Oriented River Work" by the national government:

"Nature-Oriented River Work" in Japan began in 1990 as a national pilot model, and advanced efforts have been made throughout the country. This has led to

> *"a major shift in Japan's river development from a conventional focus on flood control and water utilization to river improvement works that harmonize flood control, water utilization and the environment".*

Excellent examples of river improvement practices that meet the objectives of the nature-oriented river work began to be found in many regions.

On the other hand, there were many cases of poorly designed riverbank and waterfront construction projects, such as one-size-fits-all construction methods that resulted in monotonous riverbanks and waterfronts, or the simple adoption of riverbank construction methods used in other regions without consideration of local conditions.

To address these problems, a new set of *"Basic Guidelines for Nature-Oriented River Work"* was published in 2006. Nature-Oriented River Work is the foundation for all river improvement works, and its methods have been spreading nationwide for all river management activities. This has led to various initiatives in many places. This set of guidelines identifies the following three points as the direction for future river improvement programs.

(a) River improvement programs must take into account the entire natural process of the river, such as erosion, sedimentation, and transport.

(b) In addition to preserving and creating environments for living organisms to live, grow, and reproduce, the river should be restored in a way that is linked to local lifestyles, history, and culture.

(c) River improvement programs must take into account the overall river management, including survey, planning, design, construction, and maintenance.

Furthermore, the *"Technical Standard for River Channel Planning for Small and Medium-Sized Rivers"* was released in 2008 to provide basic technical concepts and considerations for the preparation of river channel plans for small and medium-sized rivers.

Adapting the national framework to the regional context:

While the national government provides general guidelines for river improvement, these standards serve only as a basic framework. The technical specifications set at the national level cannot be uniformly applied across all river development plans in Aichi Prefecture, as each river possesses unique characteristics—such as flow rate, length, basin topography, and surrounding land use. Additionally, the development approach varies based on the river's intended purpose, whether for flood control or water utilization. As a result, the Aichi Prefectural Government has taken proactive measures to tailor these guidelines to its specific regional needs.

Since 1991, the Aichi Prefectural Government, in cooperation with national initiatives, has also been promoting "Nature Oriented River Work" to coordinate flood control, water utilization, and the environment through traditional construction methods using natural materials. Based on the premise that "Nature creates the river," river improvement programs in Aichi Prefecture take into consideration the diverse river environments and restore rivers that are closer to their original condition.

KEY ACTIVITIES AND INNOVATIONS

The Aichi Prefectural Government has independently implemented the following measures and activities:

Production of “Nature-Oriented River Work Advice Book”

In order to implement nature-oriented river work, it is important to clearly envision and plan what kind of river the target river should be, what kind of environment should be conserved and restored in the river This involves assessing the current conditions of the river, identifying its strengths and areas for improvement, and determining the necessary measures to achieve the desired outcomes. Observing the river firsthand, understanding its unique characteristics, and predicting the impacts of human intervention are crucial steps. However, since natural changes cannot be accurately predicted by calculations alone, it is beneficial to also study similar cases. Learning from environments in rivers that remain unrestored or analyzing the long-term effects on restored areas provides valuable insights for future river development projects.

In response to these needs, the Aichi Prefectural Government has published the “Nature-Oriented River Work Advice Book”. This resource shares valuable experience and expertise by providing a comprehensive evaluation of 20 rivers that have been previously restored. It also includes proposed improvements for river channel plans for 25 rivers scheduled for restoration. Additionally, the book offers a summary of key considerations organized by improvement themes, aiming to guide and inform future river management efforts. This booklet is used as a reference by river improvement staff in the prefecture when working on the planning, design, and implementation of the nature-oriented river work projects.

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Figure 1: Nature-Oriented River Work Advice Book

Formulation of “Nature-Oriented River Work Plan"

Although the concept of “Nature-Oriented River Work” is presented in the river development plan, which sets out the details of maintenance for the next 20 to 30 years, it has been difficult to incorporate the concept into the implementation design for actual work.

To ensure that the concept is effectively applied in practice, a “Nature-Oriented River Work Plan” is being developed. This plan aims to refine and detail specific river channel designs that integrate flood control, water utilization, and environmental considerations. It serves as a crucial link between overarching river development plans and their implementation, ensuring that the nature-oriented approach is consistently reflected in on-the-ground projects.

To advance the basic design of river improvement projects, a study committee and specialized groups have been established, including experts and representatives from the prefecture, municipalities, and other relevant stakeholders. These groups conduct hearings with local residents to gather input on river design. They consider how to best integrate flood control, water utilization, and environmental protection while incorporating expert advice. The findings and recommendations from these discussions are compiled into the “Nature-Oriented River Work Plan,” which guides the development of river improvement projects in line with nature-oriented principles.

Figure 2: Nature-Oriented River Work Study Meeting and Image Diagram of Maintenance Plans

Practice of "Nature-Oriented River Work"

Since the formulation of the "Basic Guidelines for the Nature-Oriented River Work," a number of river projects have been carried out based on this guideline. Some projects have specifically aimed to engage local residents and increase their familiarity with their local rivers. In these nature-oriented efforts, natural materials such as rocks, stones, sand, and wood, which are native to or found around the river, are used as much as possible. Additionally, maintenance practices are tailored to the unique characteristics of each river. This approach not only preserves the distinctiveness of each river but also minimizes the overall environmental impact of the development.

These practices are considered to contribute to Target 12 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework: "Significantly increase the area and quality, and connectivity of, access to, and benefits from green and blue spaces in urban and densely populated areas sustainably, by mainstreaming the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, and ensure biodiversity-inclusive urban planning, enhancing native biodiversity, ecological connectivity and integrity, and improving human health and well-being and connection to nature, and contributing to inclusive and sustainable urbanization and to the provision of ecosystem functions and services."

Below are some examples of various nature-oriented river work projects:

Revetment by stone masonry

A revetment made of piled stones have gaps between them. These gaps provide habitat for organisms and allow aquatic organisms and other living things to move between the water's edge and the ground.

Restoration of Wetland Vegetation

Efforts are being made to restore wetland vegetation by creating areas where water flows more slowly and soils can more easily adhere to the water's edge. As wetland plants regenerate, insects such as dragonflies will begin to return.

Maintenance and creation of diverse waterfront lines and riverbanks

Changes in the flow and waterlines are necessary for riparian creatures to live. These changes create a diverse environment.

Conserving and restoring riparian areas, which are unique places in rivers that appear and disappear as the water rises and falls, will help protect the habitats of riparian species and also make these places familiar to people as valuable green spaces in the city.

Maintenance and Creation of Riparian Forests

The ecosystem is not simply confined to the river, but consists of riparian forests as an axis connecting with the surrounding greenery.

Riverscapes, including riparian forests, can also be an important element in shaping the unique landscape of a locality.

Fishway Device

Rivers often use drop-offs and weirs to manage water flow, but these structures can block the movement of fish and other aquatic organisms. A fishway device is designed to address this issue by allowing these creatures to pass through or around the obstacles. By carefully designing the shape of these structures to balance their flow-regulating function with the needs of aquatic life, fishway devices enable the movement of living organisms up and down the river.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

One key goal of nature-oriented river work is to preserve and create diverse ecosystems. Rivers support a wide range of organisms, including aquatic insects, plants, crustaceans, benthic animals, and fish. Additionally, non-aquatic creatures such as birds and mammals also benefit from river ecosystems, either by preying on aquatic and benthic species or using the river as a source of water.

Even in areas that were once covered with concrete due to river construction, many creatures will return to these areas as nature-oriented river work restores habitats for plants and animals. Gradually, the variety and number of species will increase, and the rich ecosystem will be restored once again.

Other expected environmental impacts are:

1. Securing habitats for organisms through the use of natural stone

Revetment piled with natural stones helps increase the number of various organisms that take advantage of the spaces between the stones. These organisms include all aquatic organisms, such as fish, insects, and crustaceans,

that use the space commensurate with their size. And as the number of these small organisms increases, the base of the food chain pyramid expands, leading to an increase in all the organisms that make up the pyramid.

2. Restoration of vegetation by soil covering

Restoring vegetation through soil-covering is also important. To achieve this, the first step is to devise a way to make it easier for soil to adhere to the revetment. This is because soil allows plants to take root and regenerate. Specific methods include controlling the flow of water through water control works to promote soil accumulation, filling the gaps between piles of stones or concrete blocks with soil, and covering the entire revetment with soil. Restoring riparian vegetation will increase the number of organisms that feed on and inhabit the vegetation. Furthermore, by utilizing local soil for the covering, the seeds of native plants contained therein can be encouraged to sprout.

3. “Effective creation” of river currents

Natural river currents vary widely, including shallow and fast-flowing sections, slow-moving areas, deep and still pools, and narrow channels branching from the main stream. Each of these conditions supports different types of organisms adapted to specific flow conditions. To enhance river diversity, nature-oriented river work intentionally modifies the river's flow to eliminate straight paths and recreate various natural conditions. This approach mimics natural river processes and fosters a rich and diverse river environment. As a result, different species settle in their preferred habitats, such as:

- Ayu sweetfish in swift currents

- Pseudorasbora parva, Tanago (Acheilognathus melanogaster), and damselflies in slow streams

- Catfish in deep pools

- Killifish and water striders in narrow streams

These varied river conditions help increase species diversity and create numerous habitats for different organisms.

4. Maintenance and restoration of riverbanks

Natural rivers feature riverbanks and sandbanks composed of stone and sand, which are sensitive to changes in water levels. These areas can become submerged or reshaped even with small increases in water flow. Despite their instability, they support unique ecosystems and landscapes, with plants and animals adapted to these conditions.

In nature-oriented river work, efforts are made to conserve or restore these riverbanks. This helps protect the distinctive habitats and landscapes of riverine species while also providing valuable green spaces within urban areas.

5. Maintenance of riparian forests

Trees growing along natural riverbanks are known as riparian forests. These forests provide essential food and habitat for birds and insects, and fallen leaves and insects offer nourishment for aquatic organisms. Additionally, trees offer shade along the river and its banks, contributing to both the natural ecosystem and recreational spaces for people.

However, excessive tree growth can obstruct water flow during high water levels, particularly in small and medium-sized rivers. To balance ecological benefits with flood control, the Aichi Prefectural Government maintains and restores riparian forests in areas where they do not hinder water flow. Tree planting is carried out with the involvement of local residents, who also participate in ongoing maintenance and management efforts to improve the river environment.

6. Creation of ecosystem connections centered on rivers

By maintaining, conserving, or restoring the natural environment of the river through nature-oriented river work, the river becomes a water and green corridor that connects the upstream area with the downstream area. And this corridor has points of contact with other green spaces, so the river allows the areal migration of various organisms through this corridor. In essence, the river acts as the central axis of an extended ecosystem. This will conserve biodiversity and contribute to the maintenance of a rich ecosystem for the entire region.

SOCIOECONOMIC IMPACTS

1. Raise awareness of river improvement works among local residents

The national government's basic guidelines, introduced at the beginning of this case study define nature-oriented river work as follows: "Nature-oriented river work refers to river management that conserves and restores environments for living organisms native to rivers to live, grow, and reproduce, as well as diverse river landscapes, while taking into account the natural process of the river as a whole and harmonizing them with local lifestyles, history and culture."

The guidelines also emphasize the involvement of both experts and local residents in planning nature-oriented river work projects. This approach allows residents to actively participate in envisioning and developing a river that balances three key aspects:

Environment: Conserving and restoring the natural diversity of the river.

Flood Control: Ensuring the river remains safe and secure.

Water Utilization: Facilitating the stable use of river water.

By engaging in this process, local residents can take ownership of river development, fostering a lasting connection to the river even after the project is complete. Ongoing observation and maintenance are essential for nature-oriented river work, and local participation in these activities will enhance the overall success and sustainability of the river improvement efforts.

2. Raise people's environmental awareness through exposure to the rich river ecosystems

Exposure to rich ecosystems through nature-oriented river work increases people's environmental awareness. By conserving and restoring the region's diverse ecosystems, these projects allow local communities to engage with and appreciate a well-preserved natural environment. This heightened awareness of the environment and biodiversity extends beyond the river itself, contributing to the broader goal of "mainstreaming biodiversity." This approach integrates the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity into everyday life and various socio-economic activities, fostering a biodiversity-conscious society and helping to mitigate biodiversity loss.

POLICY IMPACTS

Nature-oriented river work, initially driven by national and local governments reflecting on modern river construction practices, has had notable policy impacts:

1. Increased local engagement: By incorporating local residents' opinions into the planning process and making the restored rivers more accessible and familiar to the community, the project has heightened local interest in river management policies. This engagement potentially influences public support and participation in broader policies related to flood control and river construction.

2. Integration in other sectors: The "Kodomo Mannaka Machizukuri" (Children's Community Development) project, which focuses on enhancing living spaces for children and supporting child-rearing policies, has been accelerated to strengthen these initiatives. One of the key aspects of this policy is improving river spaces to provide safe, natural environments where children can interact with nature. Nature-oriented river work is crucial in this context, as it contributes significantly to creating these child-friendly river environments, aligning with broader goals of supporting children and child-rearing households in the community.

3. Adaptation to climate change: With climate change increasing the frequency and severity of floods, there is a shift towards comprehensive "river basin management." This approach involves all stakeholders working together to manage flood risks across entire river basins, integrating natural processes and green infrastructure into flood control strategies.

SUSTAINABILITY

All rivers require ongoing maintenance and management even after flood control works have been completed. The same is true for nature-oriented river work. In fact, the concept of nature-oriented river management is grounded in the natural processes of rivers. Given the ever-changing nature of rivers, it is essential to regularly assess their conditions and take necessary actions.

Nature-oriented river work projects do not end with the completion of construction. It is necessary to continue to observe the rivers that change with the forces of nature. However, since we are dealing with a force of nature, it is not always possible to obtain the expected results. Even if riffles and pools have been constructed with great effort, they may look completely different after a flood. The concept of creating a nature-oriented river is to allow for such disturbances, but in some cases, it may be necessary to review the design, layout, etc. of structures in light of these changes. This is called adaptive management.

Adaptive management means to try things out for a certain period of time with some ideas, and to correct the course if there are any inconveniences. By doing this repeatedly, it is possible to find a way to reach a compromise that will produce the best results when things are not fully understood or when there are many possible methods. It is also easier to obtain the agreement of all parties involved.

In order to implement adaptive management, monitoring the post-construction status is very important. It is desirable to monitor the physical environment, such as changes in river topography and sediment conditions, as well as the habitat and growth of organisms. There are many things that can be done, such as conducting fixed-point photography on a regular basis during river patrols and other routine maintenance and management activities, and utilizing information provided by local residents and citizen groups.

In this context, a government-appointed committee has issued a recommendation highlighting the importance of regional cooperation for restoring sustainable rivers, focusing on two key aspects:

1. River Improvements Supported by Local Communities

The recommendation emphasizes the need for a system that enables citizens to actively participate in all stages of nature-oriented river management, from surveys to maintenance and monitoring. This approach aims to strengthen regional cooperation and promote sustainable river improvements. It also suggests creating mechanisms to enhance the attractiveness of rivers within the community, thereby increasing local interest and encouraging residents to take responsibility for maintaining a healthy river environment.

2. Formation of an Ecosystem Network in Collaboration with Watershed Residents

As mentioned above, rivers have a significant environmental impact not only on the area around the channels, but also on the entire watersheds. Therefore, the cooperation and involvement of diverse entities, including the residents of the watershed, is extremely important. From this perspective, it is expected that the nature-oriented river work will serve as a catalyst for building sustainable partnerships in the watershed.

Additionally, with the goal of enhancing sustainability, the Aichi Prefectural Government has formulated the Aichi Biodiversity Strategy 2030, aimed at fostering a sustainable society by 2030. This strategy provides concrete guidelines for promoting the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity by engaging various stakeholders. The strategy is built on two key pillars: the Formation of Ecosystem Networks and the Acceleration of Biodiversity Mainstreaming, both of which are being actively pursued.

PARTNERSHIPS

The Aichi Biodiversity Strategy 2030 mentioned above promotes a strong partnership between different actors. In particular, through the "Formation of Ecosystem Networks". The prefectural area is divided into nine areas based on major river basins, and an "Ecosystem Network Council" has been established in each of these areas. The councils promote collaboration among various entities within each region, including environmental conservation groups, universities, businesses, and governments, to conserve biodiversity. The members of each council work together under a common goal and promote the formation of "ecosystem network" that connects living habitats while conserving and restoring the area's natural environment and fostering human connections.

Moreover, the Aichi Prefectural Government is advancing the Yahagi River-Toyogawa River Carbon Neutral (CN) Project, which uses these two rivers as models for integrated basin management. The project seeks to achieve carbon neutrality through comprehensive and cross-sector partnerships between public and private entities. Its focus includes the water cycle, renewable energy introduction, forest conservation, flood control, water supply, and enhancing national resilience.

The Green Infrastructure Strategy 2023, developed by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism in September 2023, also advocates for nature-oriented river management. This approach aims to create "a society where people can live healthily, comfortably, creatively, and enjoyably in a natural environment" and where "children can grow up healthy and happy in the comfort and community created by nature." Looking ahead, it is anticipated that rivers restored through nature-oriented management will become spaces for local activities and education, further strengthening partnerships and community engagement.

REPLICATION AND APPLICABILITY

As discussed earlier, all rivers are different in terms of flow, length, topography, and land use in the watershed. The type of construction also depends on the purpose of the project, such as whether it is for flood control or water utilization. This is even more true in different countries and regions, so the experience and knowledge of river improvement works gained in Aichi Prefecture and Japan may not be directly applicable to other regions and countries.

However, the ideas and basic technologies and methods of nature-oriented river work, could be useful suggestions for other regions.

To successfully implement a similar project in your region, consider the following elements:

Integration of Flood Control with Biodiversity

- Shift from traditional flood management to nature-oriented river work by using natural materials (e.g., stones, sand, and native plants) to enhance both flood control and ecosystem preservation.
- Balance flood control, water utilization, and biodiversity conservation.
- Address the entire river ecosystem, from upstream to downstream, while considering connections with surrounding land.

- Design rivers as corridors that link green spaces, enhancing biodiversity and creating interconnected ecosystems. Replicate this approach by establishing similar networks that connect natural areas in other regions.

- Create diverse riverbank conditions (e.g., wetlands, pools, swift currents) to support native species. Incorporate features like revetments with gaps for small organisms and fishways to allow aquatic life to bypass obstacles.

Tailored Regional Strategies

- Recognize that river characteristics vary; adapt management strategies to the specific flow, topography, and land use of each region.

National and Local Government Collaboration

- Align project goals with national guidelines (e.g., Basic Guidelines for Nature-Oriented River Work) and adapt them to regional contexts. National, subnational and local partnerships ensure broader policies are implemented effectively.

Adaptive Management and Long-Term Monitoring

- Rivers change over time, so adaptive management is vital. The project emphasizes the need for continual monitoring of river ecosystems and adjusting strategies as conditions evolve. This ensures that the project's goals of flood control and biodiversity conservation are sustainable over the long term.

- Implementing cost-effective methods for monitoring, such as fixed-point photography or citizen reports, allows for efficient tracking of changes.

Use of Local Natural Materials

- Source materials from the surrounding environment (e.g., stones, soil) to minimize environmental disruption and support local biodiversity.

Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration and Cross-Sector Partnerships

- Foster collaborations between governments, local communities, environmental groups, and businesses to ensure the sustainability and adaptability of the project.

- Engage local communities in river maintenance to ensure long-term success, fostering ownership and continuous involvement after project completion.

- Promote environmental awareness through education, encouraging residents to actively contribute to biodiversity and river preservation.

It is important to consider that “nature-oriented river work” has a different concept from the conventional approach to river development, which focuses on flood control and water use; it is an effort to restore a good relationship between people and rivers while harmonizing the natural environment with flood control and water utilization. This approach would be of great help to other regions and countries as well.

The recommendation titled "Toward Sustainable Practical Nature-oriented River Work," compiled in 2017 by a national government committee, also emphasizes the importance of contributing to the international community. The recommendation proposes to make technical contributions through information dissemination and exchange, and to collect and organize information on overseas efforts in the field of river environment from the perspective of further upgrading the nature-oriented river work.

At present, there is no concrete example of technology transfer of nature-oriented river work carried out in Aichi Prefecture. However, for the reasons mentioned above, the nature-oriented river work being promoted in Japan and Aichi Prefecture has sufficient transferability and applicability. Aichi hopes that these examples will inspire other regions and help advance nature-oriented river work globally, contributing to biodiversity conservation and supporting the effective implementation of the SDGs.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information about this project, to schedule an informational meeting, resolve doubts, and/or obtain support in the execution of similar projects, please contact us through: info@regions4.org.

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ABOUT REGIONS4

Regions4 (formerly known as nrg4SD) is a global network that exclusively represents regional governments (states, regions, and provinces) in UN processes, European Union initiatives, and global debates in the fields of climate change, biodiversity, and sustainable development. Regions4 was established in 2002 at the World Summit in Johannesburg and currently represents over 40 members from 20 countries across 4 continents. Through advocacy, cooperation, and capacity development, Regions4 empowers regional governments to accelerate global action.

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