

Interviewers: To get started, could you please introduce yourself and explain how you became a participant in the *INOW* program?

John: I've been teaching at a national university in Japan for about 15 years. I first learned about the town through a well-known [YouTube](#) video about Japan's zero-waste town, which has been around for more than a decade. I've been using that video in my classes for many years and was always curious about the place.

It was serendipitous how I got involved. It was 2020, which was an unusual year. I normally go back to the U.S. every summer, and I had planned to leave for a study leave in the fall, but that obviously didn't happen. So I started looking for alternative, meaningful things to do, and I came across the INOW Program through a Facebook ad. I had always been curious about the town, and although I'd been to Tokushima, I'd never been to Kamikatsu. It just felt like the right time.

I applied to what was called an "internship" back then, had a short online interview with one of the coordinators to ensure we were a match, and that was it.

Interviewers: So, how long did you participate in the program, and what did you do there?

John: I joined a two-week program. The program included accommodation in a share house, and while there was a fee, it covered everything.

The program was centered around the town's zero-waste philosophy, but it also focused on community engagement. One highlight was reading the book *The Abundance of Less*, which I had known about prior to the program. When I arrived in Kamikatsu, I was surprised to find it in my guest room. Two people featured in the book actually live in Kamikatsu. One co-founded the zero-waste initiative, and the other is more of a local symbol of the lifestyle who lives completely off-grid. He grows all his food, lives in a small cabin, and uses no modern appliances.

The program was packed with meaningful activities. We had daily activities, with a few rest days. I spent two or three days volunteering at the *gomi* (garbage) station. Kamikatsu has no garbage pickup. Everyone brings their waste to the station and separates it into over 40 categories. It's actually a beautiful facility, often featured in photos and videos.

I also spent a day visiting the off-grid person I mentioned earlier, [Osamu Nakamura](#). He is actually an artist. I did some art with him and learned about his lifestyle. On another day, I visited another program founder's home and helped with some farming. There was also an indigo dyeing workshop with local craftspeople.

Interviewers: Was everything at the garbage station handled by volunteers? Was there staff support?

John: There is a full-time staff who I assume are paid. One of the men featured in the [YouTube](#) video, Kiyohara-san, still works there. It was interesting to see the range of locals, as some were

pros, sorting perfectly into all 40+ categories, while others, such as the volunteers, came in needing lots of help and support.

The staff helps clarify what goes where, because mis-sorting makes more work later. With items like an electric carpet, which contains various materials, we'd disassemble them after the residents dropped them off. They weren't required to do it themselves.

Interviewers: What kind of training or support did the organization give you to carry out your work?

John: There wasn't much formal training. It's more of a "jump in and learn" approach. They'd brief you on your tasks that day, and then you'd shadow or assist. They're used to hosting global volunteers, so they know how to onboard people quickly and effectively.

Interviewers: What other kinds of work did you do in the program?

John: I also volunteered at the *Polestar Cafe*, run by Terumi Azuma, whose mother was one of the founders of the zero-waste movement. I spent a few days prepping meals, sweeping the sidewalk, and even baking. That was something I hadn't done in decades, but it was really refreshing, actually.

The cafe also functions as a kind of zero-waste general store. They sell everything from coffee beans to dish soap, but you have to bring your own containers. There is nothing pre-packaged. Fortunately, the share house provided reusable containers. Composting was part of the daily routine, too. Any kitchen waste went straight into a composting hole located in the backyard.

Interviewers: Were there any new skills or experiences that stood out to you?

John: Absolutely. Besides the cooking and composting, I helped make chestnut tarts using fresh local ingredients. Peeling chestnuts by hand was surprisingly difficult. It was all a very hands-on learning experience that was very valuable and rewarding.

Interviewers: You mentioned you've used the Kamikatsu [YouTube](#) video in your classes. What do you hope your students take away from it?

John: It's to get them thinking about daily waste habits, especially plastic and over-packaging. Japan is often praised for recycling, but its actual recycling rate is not as high as people think. Kamikatsu is an exception, and I use it to contrast with what students currently do.

When students learn that most areas in Japan separate waste into just 3–5 categories, and then see Kamikatsu's 40+, they're often shocked. Some find it extreme, but I hope it makes them reflect on what's possible.

Interviewers: Do you think a program like this could be implemented in a larger city?

John: That's the big question. In theory, it should be easier in cities with younger populations, but then again, people in such cities are also busier. Kamikatsu's model hasn't really caught on elsewhere in Japan, which leads some to see it as a failure. But maybe the goal isn't replication, but inspiration. Even big cities can implement aspects of it.

In some cities in Japan, there is strong neighborhood oversight in some areas. Some people take garbage disposal and recycling very seriously.

Interviewers: Is the program entirely nonprofit?

John: As far as I know, yes. Though there's now a modern hotel next to the Garbage station, and I think it's operated by an outside company. There is a bit of tension there. They welcome outside attention, but they don't want businesses coming in just to profit off the zero-waste branding.

One example that works well is a local brewery. It was built with community input and follows the local sustainability ethos. The building is made entirely from recycled windows and doors, and the business model aligns with Kamikatsu's values.

Interviewers: Would you recommend this program to students or others?

John: Definitely. It's a short but unique and deeply meaningful experience. It pushes you out of your comfort zone and opens your eyes to new lifestyles and environmental practices. I think it would be especially beneficial for students, particularly those studying intercultural communication or sustainability. Working with international and Japanese volunteers side-by-side is a unique and valuable opportunity.

Interviewers: Were there many international volunteers while you were there?

John: It was 2020, so it was right on the edge of what was possible due to COVID. The program had just gotten up and running when the pandemic hit. I had to do daily temperature checks and follow protocols to participate. But in normal years, I believe they host people from all over the world.

Interviewers: Were there any moments or tasks that stood out as especially meaningful?

John: Volunteering at the garbage station was definitely a highlight. To actually see the place that I'd been teaching about up close and be part of it. It adds so much to my classes now, because I can say, "I've been there," and show students my photos.

Working at the restaurant was also incredibly valuable, seeing how they prepare food, source ingredients locally, and reduce waste in their daily operations. It made me reflect on my own relationship with food and consumption.

I should mention that I've been teaching a content-based course called *Global Jinzai Ikusei*, or Global Human Resources. So I'm really interested in the topic, but I realized I hadn't

really lived it enough, so I wanted to get a more hands-on experience, kind of like fieldwork, to help me teach the course better. That was incredibly valuable.

Interviewer: That's wonderful. In your course, do you discuss other similar programs?

John: Not yet, but I probably should. I do have one guest speaker whose name is Philip Nguyen. He's from California, and he also went to Kamikatsu. The former coordinator put me in touch with him as a potential speaker.

He made an app called *Mamoru*, which is kind of similar to the *Mymizu* app by Robin Lewis. *Mamoru* is a map of sustainable businesses around Japan, such as organic supermarkets, eco cafés, that kind of thing. So if you're interested in supporting sustainable local businesses, it's a great tool.

I usually have him join my class online as a guest speaker. [He talks about his site and the challenges of promoting sustainability](#). He's done research showing that, in global surveys, young Japanese tend to be less engaged in eco-movements than their counterparts abroad. That sparks really good discussions with my students about greenwashing and authenticity in environmental marketing.

Interviewer: That's super interesting. Is the app bilingual?

John: I believe so, but I'm not completely sure. I haven't checked it recently, so I'm not sure if he's still actively developing it or if he's moved on to something else.

Interviewer: I'll download it later. I've been finding a couple of good sites and programs today from talking to people.

John: That's great.

Interviewer: Shifting gears a bit, from your experience, do you think this kind of program has a meaningful local or global impact?

John: Yeah, I really do. It raises awareness and gives people a deeper opportunity to engage. More and more people are visiting Japan, and it's great when tourism goes beyond sightseeing, and when it becomes about participating in something meaningful.

It reminds me a bit of the *WWOOF* program ([World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms](#)) that promotes volunteering on organic farms, where you work in exchange for room and board. These kinds of experiences allow you to really live with locals and understand daily life. It's a very different kind of travel. So yeah, Kamikatsu offers that same kind of local, grounded experience, which is rare in Japan if you're just following the typical tourist trail.

Interviewer: Do you think this kind of program contributes to broader global conversations, such as around human rights or climate justice?

John: I don't know if I'd call it a human rights issue per se, but in terms of environmental justice and the SDGs, absolutely. There have been lots of YouTube videos and documentaries about Kamikatsu. It has gone viral several times. So I think that helps spread the word and puts it on the global map. I mean, for such a tiny, off-the-beaten-path village in Shikoku, it's amazing how much international attention it's received.

Interviewer: Yeah, very true. Is there anything else you'd like to share, such as something we might include for students?

John: Just to reiterate that you don't need to go all the way to Kamikatsu or live a zero-waste lifestyle. However, I really encourage students, and teachers too, to seek out opportunities that align with any of the SDGs. Get out of your comfort zone. Even short experiences can be transformative. And it's not just for learning, but it's also for living.

Also, I think that learning outside the classroom is critical. Summer break is long. Of course, students need rest, but even a week or a few days can be spent volunteering, joining a program, or doing an internship. And for teachers, too. It was so good for me to engage with these issues in a tangible way. Not just read about them, but live them.

Interviewer: That's such a good point. And there must be ways for students to get involved, maybe even locally, with community-based programs?

John: Absolutely. There must be volunteer or internship programs where students can contribute to sustainability or community development, especially in their own neighborhoods.

Interviewer: That's a great suggestion. We'll definitely look into that more and maybe include it in the materials. And what about the intergenerational aspect? Did you find that to be meaningful?

John: Totally. It's rare to have chances to interact with elderly Japanese outside of very formal settings. Volunteering at the local café and the garbage station gave me the opportunity to connect with people from different generations. And that was incredibly valuable.

Interviewer: Were the locals welcoming? Any signs of tourism fatigue or resistance?

John: Not at all. Everyone was very kind. My nearest supermarket owner was this lovely man who kept telling me about the upcoming firefly season several times! I use this as an example because, just like others in Kamikatsu, he was so proud of the area and genuinely excited to share it with me. I had absolutely no negative experiences at all.

Interviewer: That's really good to hear. Thank you very much for your time today and for sharing your experience.

John: Thank you. It's been great reflecting on all this.