

Our Global Community

Third in a Series of Six Articles • Linda Grier Pulliam

# The Asian Camp *Connection*

Mongolia — conjuring visions of Genghis Khan and his horsemen conquering the Eurasian empire — is not a likely locale for a gathering of camp leaders eight centuries later. But the inaugural meeting of the Asian Camping Fellowship in July 2004, found over seventy camp leaders from Hong Kong, Malaysia, Mongolia, Japan, and Australia gathered at Nairamdal International Children's Centre to develop their vision of creating a better world for children through camping.





About forty miles from Ulan Bataar, amid the undulating hills and steppes, Mongolia's largest national recreation center has hosted groups of five hundred to five thousand since 1978, including human rights conferences, meetings of UNICEF, Rotary, Scouts, and educators — as well as traditional children's summer camp sessions. The facilities of the Children's Centre include a massive building in the shape of a ship used as a welcome center and winter housing, auditorium, concert hall, classrooms, and an apartment building for staff. Summer campers are housed in cabins of twenty-five, each constructed to represent a different country — Korea, Japan, Russia.

Mongolian children attending summer camp are fully subsidized by the government and are selected by their schools or local governments. Many of the children come from nomadic families who live in *gers* (similar to yurts) on the grasslands. A program of the federal government provides medical and dental care for the children along with the activities that make camp fun — sports, crafts, languages, computers, musical performances. While preservation of the nomadic culture and ethnography is an important emphasis, visitors to the camp may hear strains of Mongolian throat music followed by a rousing rendition of "If You're Happy and You Know It," or traditional folk dances followed by the Chicken Dance or Macarena.



Meals at the camp are based on the traditional diet of pickled vegetables, cabbage, and goat and horse meat. The visiting Asian camp leaders were treated to the delicacy of goat, stuffed with herbs and hot rocks, roasted over a fire and served in the skin. Afternoon tea was served in a *ger*, accompanied by goat's milk biscuits and mare's milk.

With a population of only 2.7 million, Mongolia occupies an area slightly smaller than Alaska. Until 1996, the country was under Communist rule and has been undergoing economic and political reforms in the past decade. The operation of the Children's Centre presents major challenges for Dr. Tulshig Tuvshin, director general. Operating funds are minimal and maintaining the facilities has been difficult, but with greater government emphasis on social welfare, the energetic staff are optimistic that Nairamdal will continue to provide programs that will both serve their children and unite Mongolians with people from around the world.

### The Changing Role of Camps in Japan

The impetus for the organization of the Asian Camping Fellowship (ACF) came from members of the National Camping Association of Japan (NCAJ), and Dr. Makoto Yamada was elected as the chair of the newly formed ACF. Camping in Japan has a long

and distinguished history — with the earliest YWCA camp in 1910 and YMCA and Boy Scout camps in the 1920s. Currently 3,500 camps serve approximately thirty million children and adults annually. NCAJ has a membership of twenty-five thousand individuals as well as member federations such as Girl Scouts of the USA, YWCA, YMCA, Project Adventure, Boy Scouts of America, and many universities and colleges. NCAJ is dedicated to providing risk management education, camp instructor training, and responsiveness to the diverse needs of today's campers.

During the twentieth century, Japanese camps closely emulated the programs of American camps, but the current trend is the creation of a unique Japanese model based on ideas exchanged with other countries fused with the rich Japanese culture. At YWCA Camp Nojiri, established in 1931 by Emma Kaufmann from Canada, campers enjoy canoeing, archery, campfires, and 4 a.m. bird walks — but the program also includes making *soba* noodles, *origami*, *haiku*, and dramatization of Japanese legends. The program and philosophy of the camp reflect the Japanese love of nature through elements of Christianity and Judaism enmeshed with Shinto and Buddhism.

Yuko Shima, who has directed Nojiri for twenty years, explains that her greatest challenges are recruiting campers with the declining population of children, a very short summer season, and competition with many other activities. Environmental education has assumed a stronger role in the schools, but camps are in competition with lower-priced public facilities. Camp Nojiri is seeking to become a four-season facility in order to be financially stable.

### Camping in the Malaysian Jungle

Imagine encountering several long-tail Macaques, a bamboo rat, and the tracks of a wild boar on the trail just before your breakfast of steamed rice with coconut milk, bull's eye (fried egg), fried anchovies and peanuts, sliced cucumber and milo. Jungle Lodge, in the Selangor state of Malaysia, is flanked on both sides by protected and preserved virgin jungle. The AOS Experiential Education Centre operates a summer camp program, extensive school programs, corporate training, river treks, and survival programs. While many of the summer camp activities — archery, canoeing, cycling, fish-

ing, ropes course, swimming and horseback riding — are typical of most camps in the United States, the environmental education programs at Jungle Lodge may find students exploring the World War II underground tunnels of the freedom fighters, identifying medicinal jungle plants, replicating bark canoes and animal traps used by the Orang Asli indigenous people, cooking with bamboo and coconut shells, or weaving mats from the giant *pandanus* plants. Although the locale and activities are exotic, games, songs, and lesson plans have a distinctly American appearance, reflecting the ACA Basic Camp Director Course instructed by Armand Ball for Malaysian directors and program training by Connie Coutellier in recent years.

Malaysian camp programs date back to the 1960s when Malaysia was a member of the British Commonwealth. Most of the school teachers and headmasters were trained in Great Britain and exposed to the British Scouting Movement and to Outward Bound programs. The camp industry has shown unprecedented growth in the past five years, with forty camps currently registered by the government to provide outdoor education for the schools as well as private camps that are not registered. With this sudden growth, camps are facing the challenge of hiring and training qualified directors. The majority of the current directors come from military backgrounds and have not been trained in the type of decentralized programs offered by the camps. As in every country, financial resources are limited, and parents are reluctant to pay the cost of camp programs — although the Education and Tourism Departments are heavily subsidizing the environmental education programs.

### The Camps of Hong Kong

Occupying several islands and a piece of peninsula on a total land mass about six times the size of Washington, D.C., the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) has a population of less than seven million. Like Malaysia, camps originated in the 1960s and grew as the British government allocated resources to leisure services and youth programs in Hong Kong. There are currently fifty-six camps and sixty-eight water sports centers located mainly along the coasts. Because of the dense population, most are small and self-contained, many with capacities of one hundred to two hundred — and a few with more than two

## Recollections of Sixty Years of Japanese Camping

Sachiko (Sako) Tanaka's earliest memories of camp were of hard labor, hunger, bullying, and deprivation. As an eight-year-old, she was evacuated from Tokyo during the final year of World War II and placed at an inn in Nagano with other children from her school. The children had little to eat and worked in the nearby forest, moving stones and trees as a part of the war effort. During that year, children left the camp only to go to Tokyo for funerals of their parents. These memories contributed to a national sentiment that there should be no more wars.

Although it was a sad chapter in her early life, Sako soon learned the joy of a real camp. When she returned to Tokyo two days after the end of the war, all of the public schools were closed, but her mother was able to arrange her enrollment in a progressive private school — so progressive that the teachers felt that summer camp should be a part of the school's curriculum. There, Sako experienced the positive aspects of camp which has led to a lifetime love of the outdoors. She became involved with the Tokyo YWCA and worked at Camp Nojiri for the next half century as a counselor, housekeeper, kitchen helper, and later taught boating, camp craft, and singing — still returning each year to help with staff training. After graduating from Tsuda College, she studied at UCLA — the first Japanese to receive a MS degree in recreation and outdoor education — and later as a Ph.D. candidate in psychological and leisure counseling.

Sako has recently retired from Tsuda College after thirty-two years as a professor of recreation and outdoor education, but she has not slowed her pace. As one of the founders of the International Camping Fellowship, she enjoys traveling around the world, attending the American Camp Association Conference nearly every year, the Asian Camping Fellowship organizational meeting in Mongolia, ICF Steering Committee meetings, and the UniCurl Association in Sweden, where she was recently elected president of the organization. She is also a board member of the Youth Hostel Association and the National Recreation Association of Japan. She laughingly calls herself “the grandma of non-political organizations” and firmly believes that camping is a path to world peace.

hundred. The Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) of the HKSAR Government subvents twenty-two residential camps and three water sports centers. Other camps are operated by the Girl Guides, Scout Association, YWCA, YMCA, Caritas, religious organizations, and other social services agencies. Other water sports centers are operated by national sports associations, nongovernment organizations, and private organizations.

The temperate climate and ease of transportation allow most camps to operate year round, with special programs during school holidays. In most of the camps, three and five-day outdoor education programs for schools are subsidized and licensed by the Education and Manpower Bureau and recognized as a regular part of the curriculum. To provide quality camp services to the general public, the LCSD serves in an advisory role to offer appropriate and constructive advice to the camps. Since 1998, camp operators have also been required to obtain licenses from the Home Affairs Department under the Hotel and Guesthouse Accommodation Ordinance aiming at reaching statutory standards in building and fire safety.

Anthony Po of Camp Caritas describes the challenges facing directors as being essentially the same as those facing other local service industries — increasing competition, shortage of resources and revenue, and changing lifestyles of the Chinese peo-

ple. Risk management has evolved as a major concern after some serious camp accidents, and directors are devoting greater attention to staff qualifications, insurance, education, equipment inspection, food hygiene, and sewage discharge.

The newly established Camping Association of Hong Kong was founded with the goals of providing training opportunities and enhancing the image of camping to the public. In celebration of the new organization on August 1, 2002, five thousand campers throughout the country were presented with traditional Chinese red eggs to symbolize good fortune for the “new-born baby.” As campers hung their written wishes on a “wishing tree,” the theme song of the International Camping Fellowship, “As the Butterfly Flies,” was played to spread the messages of protecting the natural environment and greater understanding among all people.

### Building Peace Together Through Camping

Before returning to their homes in Japan, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Australia, the members of the newly-formed Asian Camping Fellowship assembled to join with the five hundred departing summer campers for their closing ceremony. As if perfectly orchestrated, the moon rose between two distant hills, framing the silhouettes of three Mongolian horsemen galloping across the steppes to ignite the huge bonfire. During

the ensuing silence, each of the camp leaders paused to contemplate the significance of the camping movement throughout Asia and around the world. While there is tremendous variation in the settings, activities, facilities, and philosophies among the camps in Asia, the motto of Nairamdal—“Building Peace Together”— will continue to remind the Asian Camping Fellowship of their role in this effort. ■

*Photos: Courtesy of Shin Takahashi.*

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