

The Backbone of Japan-New Zealand Relationship; Sister City and People-to-People Connections in Gisborne and Whakatāne

6th October 2022

Embassy of Japan in New Zealand

At the end of September in 2022, Ambassador ITO Koichi and officials from the Embassy of Japan in Wellington were thrilled to find close people-to-people connections with Japan by meeting key players in sister city engagements in Gisborne and Whakatāne.

1. Visit to Gisborne

Gisborne, historically known as Captain James Cook's landing site, has a standing 32-year sister city relationship with Nonoichi (Ishikawa), as well as being a sister city port with Gamagori (Aichi) in Japan. On September 20, Ambassador ITO was pleased to be hosted by Mayor Rehette Stoltz. He was delighted to see Mayor Stoltz's appreciation for Gisborne's close connections with Nonoichi and Gamagori, and hand a letter from Nonoichi City Mayor Awa to her, sharing the commitment to deepening their friendship and ties even further.



Mayor Rehette Stoltz and Ambassador ITO Koichi



(From left)

FUJITANI Yohei (Embassy), ISHIZU Tomotaka (Embassy), Mayor Rehette Stoltz, Ambassador ITO Koichi, GCNZ Emeritus President Hiromi Morris, and Gisborne District Chief Executive Nedine Thatcher Swann

On the following morning, Ambassador ITO visited Lytton High School, and received a warm welcome by Deputy Mayor Josh Wharehinga, Sister Cities Committee members, Lytton High School Principal Wiremu Elliot, the school's students and teachers.



(From left)
 FUJITANI Yohei (Embassy),
 ISHIZU Tomotaka (Embassy),
 Deputy Mayor Josh Wharehinga,
 Jim Osler,
 Raewynne Cook,
 Ambassador ITO Koichi,
 Hiromi Morris,
 James Barnes,
 Dorothy (Dot) McCulloch,
 Jan Calder, and
 Ann Osler



(From left)
 Ann Osler and Jim Osler,
 Ambassador ITO Koichi,
 Lytton High School Principal
 Wiremu Elliot, and
 Hiromi Morris



Photo with Lytton High School
 students, teachers and Sister
 City Committee members

Lytton High School is the only high school in Gisborne that provides Japanese language education, and has continued student exchanges with schools in Nonoichi for many years. Their school exchange, the key component of the longstanding sister city relationship, has offered Japanese students cross-cultural experiences and the opportunity to learn about cultural diversity in New Zealand.



Photo with Lytton High School Japanese learning students, Principal Wiremu Elliot, and Japanese language teacher Ryan Majstrovic.



Ambassador ITO interacting with students in Japanese class. Their Japanese skills are amazing!



(From left)
Sister Cities Committee Jim Osler,
Japanese teacher SUEMATSU Shingo,
and Ambassador ITO Koichi

Ambassador ITO was also interviewed by the Gisborne Herald.



The video report can be found on the Gisborne Herald's website here:

<https://www.gisborneherald.co.nz/video/20220922/sister-city-connections-2/>

2. Visit to Whakatāne

Whakatāne, with beautiful coastlines and natural landscapes in the Eastern Bay of Plenty, possibly a hidden tourist spot for the Japanese, is a friendship city with Shibukawa (Gunma) and a sister city with Kamagaya (Chiba). Established in 1992, it is the 30-year student exchange with Shibukawa, which prompted the signing of a friendship agreement in 2016. This year marks the 25th anniversary of the sister city relationship with Kamagaya (established in 1997).

On September 21, Ambassador ITO had the pleasure of being hosted by Mayor Judy Turner. He was delighted to hand letters from both Shibukawa City Mayor Takagi and Kamagaya City Mayor Shibata addressed to Mayor Turner to encourage the relationships with the respective cities even further.



(From left)

Chief Executive Steph O'Sullivan,
Ambassador ITO Koichi,
Deputy Mayor Andrew Iles,
and Mayor Judy Turner

On the same day, the delegation was delighted to meet Whakatāne Sister City Committee members who have committed themselves to the longstanding bond between Whakatāne and the two cities for many years. It was a valuable opportunity to listen to each member's background and passion towards the sister city relationships, and a chance to appreciate their ongoing dedication. We would particularly like to acknowledge the generosity and care offered to us by Deputy Mayor Andrew Iles from the moment of our arrival at the hotel (Tuscany Villas) until the moment our flight departed.



Photo with Whakatane Sister City Committee members

(From left) Tania Samal, Hiromi Morris, Deputy Mayor Andrew Iles, Ambassador ITO Koichi, Susanne Whale, Julie Jukes, Hilary Harison, Janie Storey, Opotiki Mayor Lyn Riesterer, and Matt Bryson

The Whakatāne District Council's Executive team, including Strategy & Transformation General Manager Steven Perdia, and Community Experience General Manager Georgina Fletcher, as well as Tourism & Events Manager Nicola Burgess were kind enough to arrange a whirlwind tour to the Japanese Garden and other natural ecotourism attractions right up until the flight to our next destination. Their teamwork and kind-hearted hospitality were greatly appreciated. The authentic Japanese Garden, which was opened in 2003 with the support of Kamagaya City and the Kamagaya Gardeners Union, local businesses and various individuals in Whakatāne, has been well-maintained thanks to the effort of Whakatāne District Council. The area comprising the Japanese Garden is a popular spot for picnics and other cultural events for local communities.



Photo with Whakatane District
Tourism & Events Manager Nicola
Burgess and the management staff in
the Japanese Garden

3. Closing

Through the trip, we found that the key players we met in the respective districts are working united as close-knit teams, bringing the strength to drive sister city engagements so vigorously. We are truly grateful for the warm hospitality and kindness that we received from all these people we met in Gisborne and Whakatāne. We value the passion, love and effort of these wonderful people that have helped the friendship and bond between Japan and New Zealand to flourish for many years. As we are celebrating the 70th anniversary of the diplomatic relationship between Japan and New Zealand this year, the trip reaffirmed that people-to-people connections are the cornerstone of Japan and New Zealand's bilateral relationship. During our trip it was also gratifying to hear of the resumption of the in-person visits to Japan that had been on hold, now that the borders have reopened.

Last but not least, we would like to express our deep appreciation to Mrs Hiromi Morris, Emeritus President of Global Cities New Zealand, for her time and effort in making thoughtful arrangements for this trip, as well as for the valuable connections that she has nurtured with the people in Gisborne and Whakatāne over many years.



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