

Earth Day supports Sagami River activities

By Esther Dacanay
Torii Editor

A cool breeze gently blows across the fields next to the Sagami River, picking up speed as it lifts a variety of colorful giant kites into the clear, blue sky.

A bright, crisp, windy day and a clean take-off area make a perfect setting for the annual Sagami Giant Kite Festival, to be held May 5 in the Araiso area near the Sagami River, which is a ten-minute drive from Camp Zama.

However, a successful kite festival may not have been possible without help from a few students from Zama Youth Center and the Kanagawa Sogo Sangyo High School, who donated some time on Earth Day, April 22, to help clean up a portion of the river bank.

Each year, a giant kite festival is held in Sagami City and Zama City, usually on *Kodomi no hi* or Children's Day, as part of the festivities for the Japanese week-long holiday, Golden Week, held April 29 – May 5. *Kodomi no hi* is also known as Boy's Festival. However, since Girl's Day is celebrated on March 3, both occasions are combined for Golden Week. The first Friday of May marks the time when Japanese families pray for the health and future success of their sons by hanging up carp streamers and displaying samurai dolls, both symbolizing strength, power and success in life.

"I think it's important to help out at the Sagami River because this is a place where people bring their children to play," said Andrea Fitzgerald, 13. "Now when people come out here, they don't have to worry about their kids getting into any dangerous garbage."

On May 5, spectators will see one thousand carp streamers hung on a wire along the

Sagami riverbed, complementing the colorful *tako*, or kites flown in the air during the Sagami Giant Kite Festival, which has been a traditional event held since the Tenpou period in the Edo era.

"I hope that our Earth Day cleanup together will get others to realize how important the environment is to us," said Kiichi Sagawara, a Kanagawa Sogo Sangyo teacher. "It's important we do everything we can to help save the earth."

The Giant Kites of Sagami are called *Sagami-no-Oodako*. Initially, the kites were flown by individual people to celebrate the birth of a child. Eventually, the tradition expanded to other areas as the reasons for flying them also changed. The kites are also flown as a form of prayer to help ensure a good harvest, flown mostly by the young men of the community.

Today, they are flown by the Sagami Giant Kite Preservation Association in the *Shindo*, *Kamiisobe*, *Simoisobe* and *Katsusaka* regions of Sagami City. The association has more than 60 members.

During the festival, three giant kites are flown in the air, ranging from 9 x 9 meters to 14.5 x 14.5 meters. Each kite is designed and carefully hand-crafted with *washi* paper, bamboo chutes and rope. The paint used to design the kites is *somoko* paint, which is a special paint visible in the sky - not a water or oil-based paint, according to Koichi Andoh, one of the top kite designers with the Sagami Giant Kite Preservation Association.

For more information on the Giant Kites of Sagami, visit www.sagami-oodako.com/e/ (Note: Christopher Bush, Torii Staff Writer, contributed to this report.)

Photos by Esther Dacanay



Photo by Christopher Bush