

# Ama Divers are Incredible!

[KEYWORDS] Ama divers / abalone farming / co-existence with the environment

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(Ocean Newsletter No. 415, 20 November 2017)

For close to 10 years now, we have continued in our efforts to have “Ama” divers placed on the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage List. Following their promotion in the NHK television drama “Ama-chan,” the Ama divers, who dive for fish unaided by oxygen tanks, attracted attention and popularity at the Ise-Shima Summit last year. However, the number of Ama divers has decreased, along with the decrease in traditional fishing methods and festivals. Ama divers, who exemplify co-existence with the ocean through sustainable fishing, are exceptional examples of Japan’s ocean cultural heritage. We would like for more people to know how incredible they are.

## Initiatives Towards Registration as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage

We have already been working for almost 10 years to have the practice of Ama diving registered as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage. In November of 2016 female divers from South Korea’s Jeju Island were registered on this list. One of the conditions for applying was that Ama divers had to be an important national cultural property. We were originally hoping to be registered at the same time as South Korea’s divers, but we were not even able to apply. In March of this year Ama divers were finally designated as an Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property, which allowed the application process to begin.

At first, we were often asked what Ama divers were, but recently we are being asked how Ama divers can be listed as a form of world heritage. After the NHK drama series “Amachan” raised awareness of Ama divers, the “Ama divers who free-dive to fish” received attention from the world’s media at the 2016 Ise-Shima G7 Summit, further increasing their visibility.

## But why are they Incredible?

So why are Ama divers so incredible, and what value do they have to modern Japan?

The first point that makes them incredible is their amazing diving skills. We call the time that Ama divers spend submerged in the water a “50-second battle.” This is the most time they can spend underwater harvesting seafood. They use their whole bodies to dive, with their entire focus being on finding the items they are searching for. They have to understand the movement of the water and stay aware of any dangers. This requires the use of all five senses throughout their dive. This requires high oxygen consumption, which limits the length of time they can remain underwater. Of course, there are differences between individuals, but generally the more experience they have, the larger their catch is. As well as diving techniques, their experience includes knowledge of the currents, tides, waves, and temperature of the ocean, as well as knowledge they have



Ama divers have ensured that the ocean's forests are protected.

accumulated about types of seafood, maturity, habitats, and breeding seasons. The acquisition of their abundant knowledge becomes their primary form of support when diving.

The fact that Ama divers are women also provides them with advantages in the ocean and when harvesting. In recent years, the number of male Ama divers is also increasing. The amounts they harvest in a single day are typically higher than the female divers. However, this difference becomes less obvious when looking at total yearly amounts. Female divers have endurance. They work persistently and persevere at their jobs. They also cooperate well with each other. They dive because they love doing it. The fact that they enjoy their jobs becomes the basis for what they do.

The second point is that Ama divers coexist with the natural environment in the ocean. While they believe in and rely on the abundance of the ocean, they also realize that the ocean is something that cannot be defied. The Ama divers pray to the gods of the ocean in each of the 27 districts they work in on the Shima Peninsula, hoping for abundant catches and for the warding off of calamities.

The divers say that their catches of abalone, turban shell, sea cucumber, and seaweed “well up out of the oceans.” During the fishing season, the divers are aware of exactly where the most seafood will “well up,” using their knowledge of the mysteries of nature. This helps them to get the



This poster “Ama divers are incredible!” was created when the practices of divers in Toba and Shima were designated as an Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property.

biggest catch possible. Ama divers have a deep instinctual awareness of the food chains and ecosystems that describe the interrelation between plants and animals in the oceans. If too much Arame seaweed is harvested, this will result in too much sunlight reaching the rocky ocean beds, reducing the food available for abalone and sea cucumber, leading to reductions in their numbers. This would mean the Ama divers would lose their catch. Their deep knowledge of this relationship means that Ama divers refer to communities of seaweed and algae as “the forests of the ocean” and take great care to ensure they do not over-harvest them.

However, there are certain overwhelming forces that prevent the Ama from doing their jobs - severe storms, typhoons, and strong seas/tsunami. In recent years, meteorological information has developed, and more detailed weather forecasts are available. However, as recently as a few decades ago sudden changes in ocean conditions led to many Ama divers losing their lives. Ama divers still live in awe of the ocean.

The third point is the role that Ama divers have as the cornerstone of the communal nature of Japanese fishing villages. Although Ama divers appear to work individually, they actually work as a community, and there are strong connections among them. Harvesting of seafood is performed on days when all of the divers from the villages in the area can participate. If one household cannot participate due to a funeral for example, no one dives on that day. This means that if there is a wedding, start of school ceremony, or birth in one of the villages, harvesting is not performed.

There are huts called “kamado” or “hiba” in the Ama divers’ villages, with one hut shared by several individuals. On work-days, the divers use the huts to change clothes, warm themselves in front of a fire, shower, eat, and rest. More than anything else, Ama divers love chatting. Topics can include everything from the amounts of abalone that were

harvested that day, to the price of items purchased the previous day on a trip to the city. There are also serious discussions about health, with topics including aches and pains in the legs and lower back, recent high blood pressure, or how good a certain doctor is. They also share information about their villages. This creates friendly relationships between the younger and older women who share these huts.

### Traditional and Sustainable Fishing

The primary goal of the divers is to harvest as much seafood as possible. But this also includes ensuring that this is performed in a sustainable manner. This is their most important vow. This vow can also be seen in two of the terms they use: “open mouths” and “not big enough.”

On days in which the abalone open their mouths, the divers try to collect as many as possible, but none are collected if their mouths are closed. For example, during the summer harvesting season in the area around Toba city in Mie Prefecture, at most there are typically only 30 to 40 days during which the abalone open their mouths. In Mie Prefecture, it is illegal to harvest abalone that have a shell length of less than 10.6 cm, which leads to the second term “not big enough”. The size limit for the operculum (lid covering the opening of the shell) of turban shells is 2.5 cm. There are also a large number of other rules (conventions) for harvesting that the Ama divers follow. This is to ensure that they do not over-collect when harvesting. The fact that these rules were agreed upon by the divers and have been followed is precisely what has allowed them to exist for such a long time.

However, the practice of Ama diving is now at risk of dying out. This is due both to aging amongst the divers, and a lack of successors. At the peak of Ama diving in 1965, there were almost 3,000 divers working around the Shima Peninsula. This has now decreased to 700 and the average age of the divers is now almost 70. If this continues, the practice of Ama diving will end within 10 years, leading to the end of a 5,000-year-old practice.

Ocean-based cultural practices are disappearing one at a time from all four sides of the Japanese archipelago. The depopulation of seaside villages is leading to the extinction of traditional forms of fishing, festivals, and other customs. I hope that the Ama divers are protected as a final bulwark against this extinction. This is not just about ensuring that old customs are retained. I hope that the revival of the Ama divers is supported in a way that makes them a standard-bearer for protecting the ocean’s environments, and that they will help to both revive and recover primary ocean industries.