



Research on Water by His Majesty the Emperor and International Society



The Emperor (then Crown Prince) giving a Keynote Address at the United Nations Special Thematic Session on Water and Disasters, March 6, 2013. This was the first speech given by a member of the Japanese Imperial Family to the UN. On the right is Ban Ki-moon, then Secretary-General of the United Nations. Photo: AP/AFLO

His vision and action have advanced from researching “water transportation systems during the Middle Ages” to globally addressing “water for happiness, peace, and prosperity.” What are the thoughts of His Majesty the Emperor of Japan, who has served as honorary president of the United Nations Secretary-General’s Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation, on water?

Hiroki Kenzo, Professor, National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS)

It was the first summer vacation period of the Reiwa era and the Emperor had navigated a busy schedule before attending to his research. Three months after his enthronement, he had restarted his study of water. I was invited to the Imperial Palace in order to present an academic lecture to the Emperor. And as usual, I was greeted with a gentle smile. The topics of discussion that day were varied: water supply, hygiene, climate change, water and food, energy, even culture and belief. It took well over the planned one hour.



Prof. Hiroki Kenzo

The topic of water is the Emperor's lifework and he has grappled squarely with it. As the Crown Prince, he gave no less than eleven keynote speeches at major water-related international conferences, in which he called for cooperation among countries to solve water issues. But what prompted him to these serious and energetic efforts? To me, it seems that it was a strong sympathy for disadvantaged and socially weak people both in Japan and overseas, as well strong ideas for the form of the Imperial House in the Reiwa Era.

Development of the Emperor's research and international activities regarding water

To find the start of the Emperor's research into water we must go back to the 1980s. It began with his graduation thesis from Gakushuin University: "A Study of Medieval Water Transport in the Seto Inland Sea." His master's thesis at the University of Oxford was "Boats and Boatmen on The Thames in the Eighteenth Century." In his book "Speech on Water Issues," the Emperor has described how his interest in water issues developed further following a 1986 visit to Nepal where he saw women and children queuing at a communal pump in the Pokhara city suburbs: "How long does it take to fill the pots they bring with this water, I wonder, I mused. And there are so many women and children. This drawing of water is such very hard work. Instinctively, I pressed the shutter button on my camera. That very scene always appears at the back of my mind when I consider water issues. I believe it is the origin of my water work."

In 2003 the Emperor served as Honorary President of the 3rd World Water Forum, held in Kyoto, Osaka and Shiga. This was an important opportunity for him to become involved in the international community's work on water issues. This meeting is fixed in the memories of those who work on water issues around the world because it remains the largest water forum ever held, with 24,000 registered participants and around 200,000 people at the water fair. In my capacity as the Vice Secretary General of the water forum, I had the opportunity to serve the Emperor, and since then I have assisted him in his water research and activities.

Becoming Honorary President of the United Nations Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation

The success of the 3rd World Water Forum was a chance for the international community to become aware of the Emperor's research into water issues and efforts to address them. In 2007, the then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan requested the Emperor to take up the role of Honorary President of the United Nations Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation (UNSGAB). This was the first time that a member of the Japanese Imperial Family had been asked to take up a role at the UN in this way. UNSGAB was not one of the many UN bodies that are set up, issue a single proposal, then dissolve. It was a highly active advisory board that had regular discussion, compiled proposals, worked to help implement them, reviewed the results, and carried that on to the next meeting. For that reason it continued from 2004 to 2015, an almost unprecedentedly long time for such a board. The Honorary President of UNSGAB was the Emperor (then Crown Prince) and its Chairperson King Willem-Alexander of the Netherlands (then Crown Prince of Orange). I worked as the Head of the UNSGAB Secretariat and supported them both.

UNSGAB was a high-level committee, and its members comprised ministers, senior government officials, scholars, and representatives of trade unions and NGOs. Discussions were wide-ranging and sometimes fiercely impassioned. I have strong memories of the Emperor listening intently to these discussions and taking notes. Heated discussions during these UNSGAB meetings sometimes went on for hours, but breaks also featured friendly informal chats. I well remember how the Emperor smiled and listened to everyone exchanging jokes and how he sometimes took part himself. It seemed to me that he treasured each occasion, meeting and each human interaction. Under the leadership of the Crown Princes of Japan and the Netherlands, UNSGAB went about its work with furious energy and 80% of its proposals were implemented.

One might say that the culmination of the Emperor's work with UNSGAB was the keynote address he gave at the Headquarters of the United Nations. The address that he gave at the March 2013 UN Special Thematic Session of the General Assembly on Water and Disasters was the first speech given by a member of the Japanese Imperial Family to the UN.

At the time, the international community still had strong memories of the Great East Japan Earthquake. The Emperor's address gave examples of historic disasters, analyzed them, and through doing so emphasized the importance of preparing for future disasters while at the same time praying for disaster victims around the world. It left a strong impression not just on specialists in water issues but also on government representatives and diplomats. Addressing this and other contributions of the Emperor to international society, Ban Ki-moon, then Secretary-General of the United Nations, stated, "I would like to express our profound respect and gratitude for the Crown Prince's outstanding achievements and deep insights."

An overview of world issues through the lens of water

All eleven of the international addresses that the Emperor gave while he was Crown Prince, including the UN keynote address, were highly praised by those involved in water issues. He has visited water facilities and historic sites in Japan and overseas, studied reference materials and documents, and given detailed and wide-ranging addresses that made an impression on those overseas and gave encouragement to those working on water issues. The content of the Emperor's addresses are wide-ranging, but as a historical researcher he often provides examples and analysis from a historical perspective. The message in his addresses is consistent: namely, to learn from historical experiences and good examples, then use that for our common future. This is an important message with international resonance that, as a historian, the Emperor is well placed to convey.

The evening after the Emperor had successfully given a keynote address to the spring 2018 World Water Forum in the Brazilian capital, we dined together. At that time, he commented casually that "water flows to many different places [different fields]". There are two billion people around the world without access to safely managed water sources. It takes hours to fetch water and this work is done mainly by women and children, who are denied opportunities for education and employment. Climate change triggers drought and large-scale flooding, meanwhile increasing poverty and widening wealth inequality across the globe. Every year in our country

of Japan, there are many victims of torrential rains, typhoons, and other water-related disasters. So, water issues are far from only being a problem for other people. I am conscious of how one might say the Emperor uses the lens of water to gain an overview of these many different global issues of poverty, the gender gap, education, environment, disasters, and peace, how he sympathizes with those facing struggles, and how he intends to work to solve those issues.

Water and Emperor-as-symbol in the Reiwa Era

In his book “Speeches on Water Issues” the Emperor writes how he is grateful to water for hugely widening his worldview. His sympathy for those facing struggles across Japan is just like that of the Emperor Emeritus and the Empress Emerita. His sympathy, however, extends further to the disadvantaged abroad about whom he learned through his international activities on water. This wish to extend all assistance possible to the disadvantaged both in Japan and abroad accords with the image of a Reiwa Era Japan that cooperates with the international community and moves forward with the rest of the world.

During his water-related research and activities, the Emperor has himself visited locations and accumulated experience. He has exchanged views face to face with people of many different nationalities, cultures, and ways of thinking; and he has taken a broad overview of the issues facing the international community and thought upon them. I am convinced that this global overview, as well as his ideas and the experiences he has described—all gained through water issues—will bear great fruit for international goodwill and the formation of a new Emperor-as-symbol-of-Japan in the Reiwa Era

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HIROKI Kenzo, Ph.D.

Professor, National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS)

Graduated from the Faculty of Engineering at the University of Tokyo in 1982 before entering the Ministry of Construction (currently MLIT). Before taking up his current post in June 2018, previous career included: Director for Disaster Prevention and Relief Coordination (MLIT); Head of Secretariat, United Nations Secretary-General’s Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation (Inter-Regional Advisor); Director, Water Resources Planning Division (MLIT). In 2014, completed second section of a PhD at the Graduate School of Frontier Sciences, University of Tokyo. Also has roles as: Sherpa to the UN-World Bank High Level Panel on Water; Member, Steering Group, High Level Risk Forum, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD); Vice Chair, Global Water Partnership (GWP); Chair, Nomination Committee, (GWP); Director, International Lake Environment Committee (ILEC); Board member, International Advisory Board of Sichuan University, China.