# Used and Protected — How Yanagawa's 930 km of Canals Stay Alive Through the Hands of Its People

Yanagawa City, Japan
Yanagawa City Tourism Association
Local Destinations (including villages, cities, municipalities, islands)
People & Community

**Summary of Good Practice Story**
Yanagawa City's 930 km of historic canals, once nearly buried under concrete in the 1980s and saved by citizen action, became a scenic tourism draw that inadvertently strained residents living along the routes (93% visitor satisfaction vs. 55% resident satisfaction). Rather than chasing more visitors, the city built a framework centred on the culture of living with water: the 1991 citizen-founded Yanagawa Water Society sustains canal-cleaning traditions and children's ecological education, the 2007 "Water Constitution" ordinance gives legal form to shared responsibility for the canals, and a Canal Environment Maintenance Organisation channels cruise and business revenue back into canal upkeep. A 2022 multi-stakeholder committee turned resident concerns into 39 concrete action measures. The result is a living model showing that institutions endure only when built on pre-existing community culture, and that resident wellbeing must be measured alongside visitor satisfaction.

**Setting the Scene: Destination & context**
There were two turning points.

The first came in the 1980s. The canals had grown so polluted that a plan emerged to fill them in and bury them under concrete — threatening not just the waterways but the life around them.

Tsutae Hiromatsu, the city's waterway section chief, fought to scrap it, and the citizens rose with him. So many canals survived not by decree alone, but through the will of residents who could not bear to lose this water. That reclamation was documented in The Story of Yanagawa's Canals (1987) — produced by Hayao Miyazaki, directed by Isao Takahata of Studio Ghibli — a testament to citizens reclaiming a life with water.

Yet something quieter was lost in the years after. As the canals became famous, they became scenery — admired, photographed, promoted. The water that once belonged to everyone began to feel as if it belonged to tourism.

The second came in 2022, when the city convened the "Committee on the Coexistence of Canals and Tourism." Around that table — operators, city, DMO and residents — a gap was laid bare: visitors reported 93% satisfaction, residents along the routes only 55%. The canals visitors admired were quietly wearing on those who called them home. They could no longer be called a success story without asking: for whom?

**The Turning Point: Why change was needed**
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**The Vision: What you set out to do**
Yanagawa's goal is neither to clean the water nor to increase visitor numbers. It is to recover a town where citizens can once again live with the canals — where children play at the water's

edge, and residents protect the water with pride. That culture of living with water is not the means to an end. It is the end itself.

To carry that culture into the future, Yanagawa built two structures to hold it up: an institutional foundation, through the civic ordinance known as the "Water Constitution," and a financial one, by returning tourism revenue directly to canal preservation. Culture sits at the centre; institution and funding form the frame around it.

This is not a system commanded from above. It is an open framework in which citizens, businesses, and government each take responsibility for the water — from their own place, in their own way.

**The Journey: How change happened**
Yanagawa's journey of transformation was not built in a single moment. It was laid down layer by layer — culture first, then institution, then funding — each one resting on what came before.

The foundation: a culture passed through the body
In 1991, inheriting both the memory of Hiromatsu's struggle and the spirit of the Ghibli documentary, citizens founded the Yanagawa Water Society (Mizu no Kai). Its roughly 130 members gather every year to clean the canals, screen the film, and participate in nationwide water surveys. Their work became a model that spread across Japan, inspiring more than 30 gatherings of the National Conference of Water Towns. But culture in Yanagawa is not only organised — it is embodied. Once a year, in the ancient horihoshi tradition, residents drain the canals entirely and clean them together, passing down a thousand years of practical wisdom through shared labour. Since 2019, the "Great Canal Survey" has brought children into this living classroom, studying the water's creatures and connecting ecological monitoring with education. In 2025, the "People and Water Watershed Lab" — a fieldwork team run with the Yanagawa Tourism Association — began gathering memories of vanished water-play and, through an initiative called Hori-day Try, bringing that play back to life.

The first layer of support: an institution with roots
In 2007, Yanagawa enacted the "Ordinance to Protect and Nurture the Canals" — known informally as the Water Constitution. It was Japan's first ordinance of its kind. Crucially, it did not order citizens to conserve. It gave legal form to a sense already rooted in the community: that the canals are ours, and that city, citizens, and businesses each carry a share of that responsibility. The ordinance lives on in successive Action Plans, including the current 2026–2035 plan, and is underpinned by twice-yearly water quality surveys at 27 monitoring sites — a programme strengthened further in 2024.

The second layer of support: tourism that gives back

Canals draw visitors. But in Yanagawa, the revenue that tourism generates flows back into the water that makes tourism possible. Through the Canal Environment Maintenance Organisation, cruise companies and local businesses pool approximately three million yen each year for canal cleaning and maintenance. Tourism does not extract from the canals — it nourishes them.

Voices becoming policy
When the 2022 coexistence committee confronted that gap, it did not produce a report and move on. Operators, city officials, the DMO, and residents sat together and identified 10 core challenges, from which 39 concrete measures were drawn. A continuous cycle — survey, committee, action plan — now keeps citizens' voices turning into policy, season by season. The journey is not finished. But its direction is clear: water back at the centre of daily life, held there by culture, law, and the quiet commitment of people who have chosen not to let it go.

**The Breakthrough: What you achieved**
Three lessons stand out — learned the hard way.

Culture before law.
The Water Constitution worked — but not because the ordinance moved citizens. It worked because a culture of living with the canals already existed. Residents join the horihoshi each year, and children the Great Canal Survey, not out of obligation but because the canals feel like theirs. The law did not create that ownership; it gave it form. The lesson for other destinations: a law without cultural roots has no foundation. Build the culture first, and the institution will hold.

Measure what is hardest to measure.
Behind a 93% visitor satisfaction score lay a 55% resident rate — and for years, no one had looked. A destination that counts only visitors, spending or satisfaction will mistake the surface of a place for the place itself. We learned to ask the harder question: how do the people who live here feel about what we are building?

A record of crisis is a story of revival.
The Ghibli documentary did not celebrate a success; it recorded a near-loss — canals almost buried under concrete, saved by citizens who refused to let them go. That film now motivates the next generation. Do not wait until your story is tidy to tell it: the struggle and the near-failure are not weaknesses. They are the story.

Our goal still lies ahead. The water is cleaner, but the canals where children once swam have not returned. We keep walking not despite that gap, but because of it.

**Reflections: What you learned and what others can learn**
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**The Ripple Effect: Lasting impact**
The ripple has already begun.

A model others can use. Yanagawa's 2007 "Water Constitution" — Japan's first ordinance dedicated to a canal network — is proof that a town can write its bond with water into law. Its Canal Environment Maintenance Organization, where operators sustain the environment that sustains them, can be adapted by any water town. Research from the People and Water Watershed Lab now shapes Yanagawa's next tourism plan, where government, business and citizens inherit water culture together.

A wisdom the world may need. Perhaps what Yanagawa offers is not a method but a culture. These canals were born because water was scarce: rather than hoarding it, the people stored, shared and protected it through use — for a thousand years. In an age awakening to the truth that resources are not infinite, that wisdom feels less like history than instruction. Yanagawa's canals are not a relic; they are a model — for any place learning that what we share outlasts what we seize.

As long as citizens love the water, and institution and funding hold that culture in place, the canals remain a living place of everyday life. One day, a summer will come when children leap into the canals again. Believing in that day, Yanagawa walks on — together with its water.

**Awards or Certifications**
Japan Sustainable Tourism Standard for Destinations (JSTS-D) — logo certified 2 December 2024, awarded to the Yanagawa Tourism Association (aligned with the GSTC international criteria)

Nationally Designated Place of Scenic Beauty "Suikyo Yanagawa" — the canal townscape of Yanagawa, designated by the Government of Japan (Agency for Cultural Affairs), 2015

**Web Articles**
Government of Japan, Public Relations Online "Highlighting Japan" — "The Yanagawa Waterways That Sustain the Water Town of Yanagawa" (official Japanese government media; English edition available) https://www.gov-online.go.jp/hlj/ja/june_2025/june_2025-02.html

Mizkan Water Culture Center journal — "The Story of Yanagawa's Revival, Achieved by the Memory of the Canals" https://www.mizu.gr.jp/kikanshi/no32/07.html

Yanagawa City (official) — "Proposal for Sustainable Tourism Promotion Utilizing the Canals" (policy proposal document) [URL 要確認]

**Other Relevant Links**
Yanagawa City Ordinance to Protect and Nurture the Canals (the "Water Constitution") — full ordinance text in the city's official database .
https://www.city.yanagawa.fukuoka.jp/reiki_int/reiki_honbun/r203RG00000823.html

Yanagawa City Action Plan for Protecting and Nurturing the Canals (2026–2035) — the multi-year plan implementing the ordinance, including the twice-yearly BOD monitoring programme.
https://www.city.yanagawa.fukuoka.jp/fs/3/7/5/1/8/_/file20260212121301.pdf

"Proposal for Sustainable Tourism Promotion Utilizing the Canals" — the recommendation compiled by the Committee on the Coexistence of Canals and Tourism .
https://www.city.yanagawa.fukuoka.jp/fs/2/3/8/7/_/yanagawa_teige_forprint_F_.pdf

**Quotes or Testimonials**
Visitor ① — Conservation & Empathy　(Female, 64, Fukuoka Prefecture)
"The scenery, full of warmth and quiet beauty, soothed my heart — just as it did when I visited years ago. If I could wish for anything, it would simply be this: that time continues to pass here, slowly, just as it is."

Resident ① — Attachment & Experiential Value　(Female, 50s, Fujiyoshi District)
"For a little while, I forgot the busyness of everyday life and let myself drift in a gentler time. There are few places left where you can travel through a landscape like this — and gliding slowly through the canals on a donko-bune has a quality of atmosphere that is simply beyond words."

Resident ② — Will to Pass It On　(Female, 50s, Yanagawa District)
"I hope we can find ways to help the few children who remain here feel that these canals are theirs to protect. I want to see a community where children can live with real vitality — where they grow up feeling pride and belonging in the place they call home. That is what I ask of those who shape this town's future."