

Volunteer Program  
**Hope Springs**  
 anew for **abaca**

by Eloisa Romero, JICA Philippines NGO Desk and Coordination Section Program Officer



*Chance may have brought Atsushi Nakanishi to Gubat, Sorsogon, but now this young Japanese volunteer is dreaming big for this small town. He succeeded in introducing new use for abaca.*

Abaca (*musa textilis*) is a kind of fiber that comes from a banana-like plant native to the Philippines. Since the early 20th century, people around the world have found various uses for abaca. Abaca rope is especially useful for seafaring because of the fiber's acquiescence to salt water. We can find abaca in an assortment of products, from furniture and carpets to dainty hats and handbags. Up to now, it is still one of the country's major exports.

Synthetic and other materials, however, started replacing some applications of abaca. With industrialization and the boom in China, small manufacturers of abaca-based products faced decline.

For abaca-producing towns like Gubat, this poses a challenge. Hence, the local government of Gubat scouts for ways to diversify the sources of income for its residents who largely rely on farming and fishing. This served as Nakanishi's ticket to Sorsogon.

Nakanishi came to the Philippines in March 2011 to provide voluntary service and share his know-how to a chosen community, through the Japan International Cooperation Agency. Nakanishi was a business consultant specializing in marketing and competitive strategy for four years prior to his assignment in the Philippines.

In his line of business, abaca is no stranger to Nakanishi. From where he came from in Japan, abaca is called "Manila Asa" which translates to, "Manila Hemp." So upon arriving in Sorsogon, he readily cooked up a marketing plan for natural fibers, including abaca, together with his counterparts from the local government.

"We tried many things, like making this handicraft called shimenawa," Nakanishi explained, referring to the Japanese enclosing rope used in rituals, especially for New Year celebrations, believed to ward off evil spirits.

"We also tried abaca for applications in car assembly in the concrete insulation parts and in making jeans." The latter hit the spot, but "it has been a long and winding road," Nakanishi recalled.

The young volunteer found resolve from a Japanese retiree who has extensive knowledge in abaca industry, Mr. Masahiko Ieda. Ieda engaged in abaca business for 30 years and his profession allowed him to respect and recognize the worth of the plant. He has established a network with manufacturers of abaca processed products including the Japanese company, Daifuku Paper Manufacturing (Daifuku). The latter has the technology to make paper from processed abaca fibers. With urging from Ieda, Nakanishi touched base with Daifuku regarding their technique.

The yarn, however, is still considered a raw material, and the next stage would be turning it to fabric. With the help of the Philippine Textile Research Institute, Nakanishi met Mr. Matthew Lazaro of Asia Textile Mills, Inc.

"When I brought (the yarn) to him, Mr. Lazaro was impressed. He promised me that he will make the jeans, and four months later, we are able to launch the product at the Manila Hotel on February 21st", Nakanishi said.

Lazaro revealed that they received an initial order for more than 6,000 pairs of abaca jeans from a Japanese trading company. Lazaro told Fiber2Fashion.com that they "have just delivered the first lot of 2,500 pieces (and expect to) be able to complete the order by end of March".

Lazaro added that "the abaca jeans are much more durable (and) being porous in nature, abaca is much more comfortable."

The jeans is dubbed "MAASA"—"Manila Asa" being the Japanese term for abaca, and "asa" meaning hope in Filipino language. The journey does not end with MAASA, though. It is just the beginning. Nakanishi plans to look for other uses for abaca, and together with the people of Gubat, he also plans to work in the supply side to improve the quality of abaca fiber from the Philippines.



*Maasa jeans was launched in Manila Hotel in February 2012*