

## Minakami Municipal Niiharu Elementary School, Grade 6

### Let's Promote the Charm of Niiharu – Sharing What Makes Our Hometown Special

At Niiharu Elementary School in Minakami-machi, Gunma, sixth graders explored the strengths and challenges of their local area through a yearlong inquiry in their integrated studies class. With growing concerns about population decline and an aging society, the students set out with a mission:

“To share the charm of Niiharu and spark interest in our community.”

#### Akaya Forest: Biodiversity and Conservation

The students first turned their attention to Akaya Forest, a vast natural area roughly 2,138 times the size of Tokyo Dome. The forest is home to many rare and endangered species, including the golden eagle, which sits at the top of the ecological food chain. They learned about conservation efforts like selective thinning of trees to help the golden eagle hunt more effectively – an initiative known as the Golden Eagle Lumber Project.

This wood is even used in school furniture and shop counters, showing how nature conservation and local resource use can go hand in hand. The students felt a sense of pride in knowing their school plays a role in this forward-thinking initiative.

#### Learning About Farming and the Power of Food

Next, the students focused on apples and rice, two of Niiharu's local specialties. They experienced firsthand how much work goes into growing apples: bagging the fruit, harvesting, and other labor-intensive steps. Through interviews with farmers, they learned about the challenges of agriculture, including vulnerability to natural disasters and the desire to provide safe food.

They also studied the rice used in their school lunches. They discovered that the clarity and coldness of local water are key to its delicious flavor. Their visits revealed the difficulties farmers face in water management and soil preparation, deepening their appreciation for both nature's gifts and human effort.

#### Rediscovering Local History and Heritage

The appeal of the region lies not only in its nature and food. The students also

learned about the historic Mikuni Kaidō road and a local historical figure, Tasuke Shiobara. They were amazed to discover that Shiobara's life of selfless service had inspired none other than Eiichi Shibusawa, a key figure in modern Japanese economics. Uncovering such stories changed how the students saw their town. They realized that Niiharu is not just rich in nature and food, but also in deep history and meaningful people.

### Looking to the Future

Through their inquiry-based learning, the students gained a newfound appreciation for Niiharu's diverse attractions. More importantly, they developed a strong desire to share what they've learned with others. Their final message was a heartfelt one: "To keep our community's charm alive for the next generation, we want to continue taking action ourselves." This shows that the students are not just learners but future leaders of a sustainable local society.