

Title	I've pursued my favorite study while occasionally facing trouble and being at a loss : Assistant Professor Kohji Hotta has to say
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## I've pursued my favorite study while occasionally facing trouble and being at a loss

"It's incredible that I have been able to maintain my interest in the sea squirt (ascidian, tunicate) for such a long time thus far," utters Dr. Hotta with an overflowing enthusiasm for this study on his face. Although he was fond of biology as a child, he had long been unsure about developing this fondness in choosing a researcher's career as a biology specialist, he confesses. In fact, there were a number of occasions in the past when he asked himself, "Will it be possible for me to accomplish this challenge?" Let's listen to Dr. Hotta on his past thoughts and how he has followed the path of a researcher.

### What was your childhood like?

I was living in Tokai City, Aichi Prefecture up to the time of elementary school first grade. Back in those days, I liked catching insects, drawing pictures and observing living things. What excited me most was when I used a microscope and found water fleas and other plankton moving in the water that I had scooped from a nearby brook. We had a microscope at home that was usually stored in a nicely built wooden box. As a grown-up, I wonder why my father, just an ordinary salaried worker, could afford such a good microscope.

As a vague memory, I remember a day when I made a clay model of the interior of a "Devil's (in Japanese, "o-ni")" body, which I explained to my grandfather. At the time he told me, "Dear grandson, you will become a scholar when you grow up."

I spent my junior and senior high school days in Otsu City, Shiga Prefecture, when I belonged to the Field and Athletic Sports Club and was running daily along the shore of Lake Biwa. Then I entered Hokkaido University and chose the Faculty of Science without hesitation so that I could engage in basic science. Given my fondness of biology, learning veterinary medicine, fisheries science or pharmaceutical faculty may have also suited me.

### How did you encounter sea squirts (ascidian, tunicate) ?

At Hokkaido University, I took up a study related to fertilization of frogs as the theme of my graduation thesis. Although my initial plan was to go on to the graduate school, I had to find another university for graduate study because Professor Chiaki Katagiri, my mentor, retired. At the time, I had an opportunity to listen to a special lecture by Professor Nori Satoh of Kyoto University. This served as an impetus for me to make up my mind to study at the Satoh lab. Professor Satoh is the top authority in Japan in the study of sea squirts (ascidian, tunicate). He is credited for enhancing the sea squirt into a model organism.

The Satoh lab was a lively place, where I received various kinds of intellectual stimulation. On the following day after I first made my appearance in the lab, I was told to go to Tohoku University's Asamushi Marine Station in the northern prefecture of Aomori. There, I devoted myself to gathering notochord cells by observing the development of the sea squirt – sitting behind a microscope for as long as one month. Now I know that it was an invaluable opportunity for me to learn the ABCs about the development of organisms. For 15 years since then, I've been engaged in sea squirt study.

### Did you choose the career of a biological researcher in a natural course of development?

No, to tell the truth. For example, there are insect researchers on one hand and, on the other hand, there are those who enjoy collecting insects as a hobby. I had long thought that there is a distinction between the two groups. In my graduate school days when I was studying under Professor Satoh, it was difficult for me to have confidence in living as a researcher. At the time, I had five classmates at the lab, one of them was a brilliant person known as "one of the best four from Kyoto University" and was writing theses on his own as a young student. Another, from the University of Tokyo, was full of the pioneer spirit so much so that he created a rearing system for *appendicularian* ("Otama-boya" in Japanese) in a wish to investigate *appendicularian*, a field left untouched. On the contrary, my awareness of biology as a newcomer to the lab remained at a level so low as to think "Living things are interesting." So, at the beginning I was embarrassed at the great gap between my fellow students. But after a lapse of time, I became absorbed in research before I knew it.

Impetuses for my awakening were delights and a sense of achievements I had when I made presentations at academic conferences and presented theses, which gained recognition. Because I was thinking that the outcome of studies should be returned to society, I then became confident to continue my career as a researcher.

This confidence, I'm sure, is indebted to the Satoh lab because the lab has a culture of valuing even small discoveries and has made it a rule to publish students' research achievements in the form of theses to the extent possible. The lab kindly prepared a system of rewarding students for their hard work.

Now finding myself in a position to guide students, I'm



**I'd like my students to experience the excitement of making a discovery because it will allow them to enjoy a sense of achievement and delight as a result of being recognized by society!**

## Kohji Hotta

Dr. Hotta graduated from the Department of Biology, Faculty of Science, Hokkaido University. He encountered the sea squirt (in other words, "ascidian", "tunicate") when studying at the Kyoto University Graduate School of Science. He completed the doctoral course at the Kyoto University Graduate School of Science. He continued to study at the National Institute of Genetics (Bioinformatics & DDBJ Research Center) as a postdoctoral fellow of the Japan Society for Promotion of Science, the National Institute for Basic Biology (Morphogenesis Division) and the Naples Marine Station, Stazione Zoologica Anton Dorn in Italy. In 2005, he became a research assistant for the Keio University's Department of Biosciences and Informatics, was promoted to research assistant in 2007, and then to the current position as assistant professor in 2009. Dr. Hotta's specialties are evolutionary developmental biology, molecular biology, bioimaging and bioinformatics.



Every time a lab student's thesis has been accepted, OBs and OGs come together to celebrate it, shouting for joy.

trying to do the same. Of course, when it comes to the world of research, you cannot always expect good results no matter how hard you have worked. Even so, I'd like my students to experience the excitement of making a discovery, so I'm willing to advise my students so that they can set good (prospective) research policies that could yield praiseworthy results. Naturally, I encourage them to publish the result of their study in the form of a thesis or other.

### **We've heard that you've had various experiences before joining Keio University. Is that right?**

I've been persistently engaged in the study of the sea squirt for 15 years, but places of research have changed from one place to another. When the complete genome sequence of the sea squirt was identified, I was learning bioinformatics and evolution at the National Institute of Genetics (in Mishima City, Shizuoka Prefecture) under Professor Takashi Gojobori. I also studied at the National Institute for Basic Biology (in Okazaki City, Aichi Prefecture) as well as at the world's oldest marine station in Naples, Stazione Zoologica Anton Dorn, Italy. During my postdoctoral period, I was privileged to devote myself to research activity in an unrestricted environment thanks to the support of many people (in particular, my wife). By changing venues of my pursuit, I was also able to meet many new people, learn about new experiment methods and absorb many, many things.

When I was offered a post at Keio University, what first occurred to and worried me was the importance of responsibility for fostering the coming generation rather than the possibility of losing the freedom I had enjoyed. So I came to Keio with determination.

About eight years have passed since I joined Keio in 2005. The fact that I have stayed here for such a long period of time means

that Keio is a comfortable place to work. I can feel that Professor Kotaro Oka and other people around me have prepared such a pleasant environment for me. The Oka lab is often referred to as Oka Zoo because studies on a variety of animals are being undertaken here. It's a truly stimulating research environment for me as a specialist of the sea squirt. At Keio University, we can obtain sufficient research funds if our applications are admitted. A system of fostering up-and-coming teaching staff is also complete here.

If a university has an excellent teaching staff, then students can receive good education.

### **We've heard that you recently initiated a Sweets Club together with other teachers, right?**

I have nothing special as a hobby because research activity is almost a hobby for me. To tell you the truth, however, I am a person with quite a sweet tooth. So I formed a Sweets Club together with other Keio staffs, visiting sweets shops when we have time. But recently I found myself gaining weight, so I bought a bicycle and began cycling from this April to lose weight. I like cycling because I can go anywhere I want on my own and I can enjoy various townscapes along the route. Perhaps it's because cycling has something in common with a sea squirt larva that swims anywhere it likes by moving its tail. Young sea squirts move, seeking to find a place to adhere to, as distant from their parents as possible. In my case, destinations of cycling are sweets shops. Readers of this bulletin, please give me information about sweets shops that I can casually drop in by bicycle.

### **◎ Some words from students ... ◎**

● Dr. Hotta is a person I can communicate with on equal terms. By frankly exchanging our views, I can sometimes feel that I have attained some growth. Above all, I respect Dr. Hotta's researcher-like persistence to what he thinks is correct, and his single-minded attitude toward what attracts his attention. The only problem about him is that he comes up with one new idea after another, which sometimes overburdens us with things to do.

(Reporter & text writer : Akiko Ikeda)

**For the full text of this interview**

<http://www.st.keio.ac.jp/kyurizukai>