

WHY ZNA?

By Ron Goforth

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In recent months, a question has been asked of me, and of several of my koi associates, by various clubs and organizations in the koi world with which I have contact or correspondence: “Why should we be a ZNA chapter? What is the advantage of being ZNA, in addition to any other koi associations we may have?”

I once was in the position of considering this question, shortly after the founding of the Lone Star Chapter. There was discussion about it among the club members, and concern expressed by some about exactly what the (then) Lone Star Koi Club would gain by the ZNA affiliation. After researching the question a bit, there were certain things which stood out not only as advantages, but unique advantages which ZNA had to offer. I’d like to share some of these thoughts with you now. Whether you are a member of a new koi club seeking national or international affiliations for support, or the member of a long-established club that is considering branching out more into the koi world, or even an individual who is not near any club’s area, but who wants to know what is happening in your hobby---these are some of the benefits of being not only a member of a ZNA chapter, but a member of ZNA yourself.

ZNA is a well-structured organization, with by-laws and standards/or judging recognized worldwide. From the beginnings with Dr. Takeo Kuroki, and his Manual to Nishikigoi, to the present day, with the many-leveled international organization that educates, informs, and supports so many different local clubs in so many different countries, we have the advantage of a great support system through ZNA. We have a built-in, tried-and-true structure for our local chapters, their regular operations, and their shows, including support from other chapters with loans of equipment, advice, assistance, and education, whether it means training a new judge, teaching a koi seminar class, or translating for a Japanese guest. Anyone who has had contact with a ZNA show can attest to the level of quality in judges which is available to us upon request. The judges who come to us from Japan as the ZNA representatives are consistently familiar with both former and current standards of koi appreciation which spring from the source of our hobby (i.e., Japan). Yet, they are unfailingly willing to offer constructive, helpful commentary without bias to not only the owners of the very best Japanese imported koi, but to the newest, “greenest” members who are so very proud of their fish as pets. Many owners who enter their fish for the first time have at the beginning of a show expressed concern to me about being “embarrassed” to show their fish to a judge from Japan---only to have that judge award a major prize to one of the fish about which they were so concerned! The comment I hear about this sort of situation is very often one of relief and pleasure that our ZNA judges are not “koi snobs”; even though they may see the very finest fish at the All-Japan Show, and are able to judge them, they are able to see the best qualities in any entrant. Also, perhaps more importantly, they are always willing to help educate us on standards of appreciation and the proper care of the koi to make them the best that they can be. And, this training is important not only to those who own and buy koi for their own collections,

but to the judges-in-training who are learning from the head judges during the actual judging process. Of course other koi organizations offer training and experience, and education, and are fine affiliations which I by no means am discounting; but I feel that ZNA has given me (and the Lone Star Chapter as well) a different and valuable perspective over the years, which is more easily experienced than defined.

ZNA has been particularly interested in the development of the koi hobby in America from its inception. As a result of this interest, ZNA can give us all a remarkable insight into the history of koi in America, the growth of the koi hobby, and again, the experience of those who have been there ahead of us, as it were, since ZNA was the first of the Japanese koi associations to have American chapters. The oldest ZNA chapter in America, Southern California ZNA (SoCal), begun by Japanese--Americans, brought the organized koi hobby to the U.S., nurturing new clubs, teaching and advising, the members often traveling to judge and assist in the new clubs' shows. Our other koi associations in the U.S. have assisted in the growth of the koi hobby on the local level, too, and in no way would I discount the many ways in which they have been helpful; but ZNA has been there---for all of us---from the very beginning. In the Lone Star Chapter, I can say from personal experience that we would not be anywhere near the level we are on today if it were not for tremendous assistance from SoCal. And, in reality, SoCal was simply doing what is always done in the spirit of ZNA, whether in the United States, Japan, or elsewhere. For example, ZNA in Japan has shown us its interest in the American development of the koi hobby by continuing to publish the beautiful English-language NICHIRIN which comes to paid ZNA members monthly, bringing the activities of other hobbyists all over the world to us, sharing pictures of some of the exquisite show winners and giving us the perspectives of experts in the fields of breeding, koi care and koi appreciation. When one considers the support (both tangible and intangible) we receive from ZNA for our shows and local chapter education, and combine it with the reliable news and information we receive from ZNA for our shows and local chapter education, and combine it with the reliable news and information we receive in every issue of NICHIRIN, I believe one has a formidable case for ZNA affiliation purely on a practical basis. There is never "too much support", never "too much" consistent expert assistance, after all! Most clubs (and individuals) would like to have as much intelligent, experienced input as they can get, and ZNA provides this from a unique angle.

ZNA, by definition and by demonstration, provides us with education in the original emphasis of our hobby: : the Japanese appreciation of koi as living objects of art. I'm afraid that as Americans, we are often perilously close to losing that appreciation. That's why I teach "Koi as Art" in a continuing lecture series at major koi events, where I feel I can reach the largest audience. "Zen Nippon Airinkai" contains in the very title the emphasis on the Zen arts, their definitions of beauty, their standards of how to create that beauty, and how to appreciate it in the koi today, before she grows, changes, and that particular moment of beauty is gone forever; it is the momentary nature of that beauty that makes it most especially a Zen art, as well as the standards of shape coloration, and grace. Through its judges, its magazine, and its educators, ZNA has consistently taught all of this since its beginnings in the United States. I sincerely believe that we would not have had nearly the opportunity to know or begin to understand the art of koi if it were not for ZNA's influence in America. Of course, we would love our beautiful pets, and enjoy their bright colors and antics in the ponds; but for me, and for many, it would not be the same at all.

Perhaps not all American koi enthusiasts share my feelings; in fact, I know many who do not, who feel that some of us make the hobby “too Japanese” and that we should work to establish “American standards of koi”. To these good folks I can only say that it is a Japanese hobby to begin with; they invented it, set the rules and standards for it, and although some may disagree, I for my part feel that it is no longer the same hobby when those rules and standards become changed because we either haven’t learned to, or don’t choose to understand them. For my part, I prefer to remain with the original emphasis placed by the hobby’s creators---it’s why I became interested in the first place: it was a way to combine a lifelong interest in ichthyology, art, gardening, and the Japanese culture (as brought into my life when, as a small boy, an old Japanese gardener taught me about Zen gardening and in the process, changed my attitudes about a great many things in life). In any case, I am one of many who feel that ZNA is a most international organization, as shown by its interest in the growth and support of local chapters everywhere; ZNA shares the best of the truly Japanese aspects of our hobby with the rest of us who have come to love it.

I sincerely hope that my insights into the advantages of ZNA affiliation have caused some of you to recognize them, also; perhaps you had already seen some of them yourselves, or perhaps I was able to give you a new outlook on something that you hadn’t seen before. We are extremely lucky here in the United States to have more than one fine organization to support us in our hobby, and it would be an asset to any club to have that support from more than one source. I believe that one of the best sources of information, education, and support available to us is from Zen Nippon Airinkai, and I hope that you choose to become a part of us.