

## Promoting Public Access to the Holdings of the National Archives of Japan

### Introduction

The Public Records and Archives Management Act (hereinafter referred to as “the Act”) was established in July 2009 as a fundamental law for the administration of government documents and records. With an eye to achieving integrated management throughout records’ life cycle—from document creation to storage, transfer, and use—the Act was drawn up to ensure appropriate handling of documents and records across government bodies. The Act also establishes rules pertaining to the use of archives transferred to the National Archives of Japan (hereinafter “NAJ”) following termination of their retention periods. The functions of NAJ are thus being substantially enhanced in accordance with the Act, and, as a result, NAJ is gaining a greater presence in Japan.

When the Act was being discussed, both ruling and opposition parties recognized its need. After deliberation and a partial revision to the government proposal, the Act was passed by the Diet in a unanimous vote. Two months later, the Democratic Party of Japan scored a landslide victory over the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (Japan’s so-called “regime change”); the current government is continuing efforts to implement the Act.

Until now, awareness of the importance of public records and their proper management has been somewhat slow to catch on in Japan: the purpose of NAJ has not been sufficiently recognized. However, with the unanimous passage of the Act intended to reinforce NAJ’s functions, it is likely that not only those directly concerned but also the public at large will gain an appreciation for the importance of public records, the necessity for records management of the government, and the role of NAJ as the body in charge of such management.

In response to the establishment of the Act, some local governments are taking steps that include opening municipal archival institutions to ensure that valuable public records are left to future generations and disclosed to local residents. Thus, recognition of the need for records management and archival institutions is growing in all corners of Japanese society.

Based on the Act, there is also pressing demand for better access to public records preserved in NAJ. This report surveys the current status of access to NAJ’s public

records holdings and to future prospects in this area.

### **1. Demand for better legal and social access**

One of NAJ's central roles is to serve as an organization supplying primary sources for public intellectual activity—supporting the nation's educational, cultural, and academic development. At the same time, by preserving and disclosing government records, NAJ raises the quality of national governance and administrative transparency by making public the processes and results of policy decisions.

As for the latter point mentioned above, the Act legally clarifies NAJ's duty as ensuring government accountability (in other words, to raise government transparency) and it unmistakably states that the public has the right to access NAJ's holdings. Consequently, NAJ must more firmly grasp its role to promote access, not only to scholars and others engaged in intellectual activities, but to the public as a whole.

The Act further stipulates “obligation of effort” in making active approaches toward promoting various types of usage, including not only conventional browsing and copying services but also exhibitions and a digital archive system. It also advocates for more members of the public to be given access to public records in NAJ.

The Act also spells out that efforts must be made to disclose records based on the passage of time. Moreover, the “30-year rule” was incorporated into a Diet resolution issued with the Act.

In the ways described above, the Act encourages NAJ to provide the general public with broader access opportunities to its holdings and to make greater efforts to disclose holdings in accordance with the passage of time.

The aforementioned details of the Act have been widely welcomed by newspapers, members of the mass media, and numerous related organizations. As I have already mentioned, the Act was unanimously passed by the Diet; yet it ought to be accepted that the policy of promoting such access is not just a legal requirement but is, moreover, a social requirement.

Furthermore, this policy is in agreement with the Code of Ethics adopted at the 13th General Assembly of ICA, specifically the portion stating that “archivists should promote the widest possible access to archival material and provide an impartial service

to all users.”

## **2. Issues and directions toward better access**

### 2-1. Expanding the scope of users

#### (1) Digital archive system

One major means of expanding the scope of NAJ's users is the Internet. Since 2005, NAJ has been creating and making public an online catalog database that covers its entire holdings (approximately 1.2 million volumes and 50 linear kilometers of shelving) through the Internet. In addition to the catalog database, “National Archives of Japan: Digital Archive” system provides digital images of a part of its holdings. (<http://www.digital.archives.go.jp/>)

Using the Internet allows anyone to view NAJ's holdings anytime, anywhere, and without charge. It even provides broad NAJ access to people who cannot easily visit due to geographical restrictions.

The NAJ “Digital Archive” is equipped with both a search and browsing function (called “Internet browsing”) for people wishing to search NAJ's holdings. Users can explore its holdings not only by a simple keyword search but also by searching through visually pleasant schemes such as chronological tables that compile major events in Japanese history as well as charts that list transitions in Japan’s administrative organization. In these ways, NAJ is working to make its holdings more user friendly for beginners and children.

The NAJ “Digital Archive” also provides an enjoyable function allowing users to view high-definition images of important cultural properties and other materials with detailed explanations (see our “Digital Gallery” page). If NAJ targeted only researchers, its traditional users, for the "Digital Archive," it would have been sufficient to simply provide search and browsing functions. However, NAJ seeks to further expand its scope of users, and thus it is providing content that can be widely enjoyed even by members of the general public.

Currently, NAJ offers 8.68 million images through the Internet. These images account for approximately 10% of public records preserved in its holdings; NAJ intends to further expand this number in the future. Moreover, the NAJ is continually working to enhance and reinforce its “Digital Archive” by making catalogs of public records accessible within one year of their annual scheduled transfer and receipt from

governmental or judicial bodies.

NAJ additionally operates the Japan Center for Asian Historical Records (hereinafter, “JACAR”). JACAR provides the public with digital images of original historical records pertaining to modern relations between Japan and its Asian neighbors as held by three national archival organizations (NAJ, Diplomatic Records Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the National Institute for Defense Studies). JACAR offers users digital images of over 20 million items and is equipped with various easy-to-use search functions. These features make it one of the largest digital archives in Japan.

Seeking to promote mutual understanding between Japan and its neighbors, JACAR is a government-initiated project that offers English, Chinese, and Korean versions in addition to Japanese. Currently, it allows searches in both Japanese and English. JACAR’s pages can be accessed from any personal computer at any time and without charge. NAJ hopes that users will make extensive use of this service.

## (2) Exhibitions

Another major means of expanding NAJ usage is to hold exhibitions. Here, NAJ presents permanent and special exhibitions introducing holdings, which include government records without any charge.

Although the number of people visiting exhibitions is small compared to national museums, due to limitations on facility size and other factors, visitors highly praise them. Exhibitions provide NAJ with an excellent opportunity to highlight the significance of public records and its own functions. Thus, we intend to increase the number of visitors to exhibitions. During the new third mid-term plan (FY2010 to FY2014), NAJ staff members will be working on improving the attractiveness of exhibitions and also considering collaborative programs with other organizations to enhance how exhibitions are facilitated.

## 2-2. Active disclosure

### (1) Full observance of the “30-year rule”

Improving access to public records requires active disclosure. In 1968, the 6th General Assembly of the ICA in Madrid adopted a “30-year rule” establishing that the period for non-disclosure of public records should not exceed 30 years from its time of creation. The Act reflects this “30-year rule” by stating in statutory form that disclosure shall be

made “based on the passage of time.” Moreover, an additional resolution passed in Diet deliberations demands that disclosure should take place based on the “30-year rule.” NAJ is fully committed to disclosure in line with the “30-year rule,” as this also gives consideration to the handling of personal information among other concerns.

## (2) Acceleration of review speed and system reinforcement

The Act stipulates that personal information, data pertaining to national security, and other such matters shall not be disclosed. Thus, when a user requests to see an item, a review must be performed to determine whether the item contains such undisclosed information. As a rule, NAJ has sought to make records available within 30 days of the receipt of requests after completing disclosure reviews; however, in order to increase the accessibility of users, there will be a need to accelerate the review process.

Whenever NAJ receives public records transferred from government and judicial bodies, it conducts a preliminary review of the records as a group prior to making them available for general use. Final reviews will be conducted after user access applications are submitted and will be carried out efficiently based on a preliminary review. In the near future, NAJ intends to go one step further by conducting disclosure reviews for records prior to accepting applications—having reviews completed before users' visit, so as to make immediate use possible when certain public records are anticipated to receive access applications. Therefore, bolstering the review system for such ends will be a future task.

## (3) Handling of personal information and other forms of information that cannot be disclosed

Nevertheless, there is some information that cannot be disclosed simply because 30 years have passed, for instance, personal information as well as corporate information. The Act states in statutory form that disclosure of public records including such information requires being taken into careful consideration by government bodies transferring records.

In order to avoid demands from government bodies limiting use of documents more than necessary, NAJ must implement activities to increase recognition among such bodies that government records should be disclosed after a certain period of time.

## 2-3. Securing and providing attractive content

### (1) Ensuring appropriate transfer of records with archival value, etc.

One of the most basic means of improving user access to NAJ is to possess attractive content. Of course, “attractive content” expected to be preserved and used by NAJ is none other than the various public records worth keeping for future generations. However, because the framework used until now does not allow records to be transferred without the agreement of government bodies—even if archivists appraise records as something that should be transferred to NAJ—, there are cases when records worthy of preservation for future generations do not get transferred and end up being destroyed.

In order to remedy this problem, the Act obligates government bodies to transfer all records that can be considered as records with archival value. This step is expected to lead an even more dramatic enhancement of NAJ's content.

However, decisions on whether individual records should be considered for archiving or not will be made on initial screenings in each ministry and agency, based on criteria to be drawn up in the near future; this makes the preparation of such criteria an extremely important task. Making judgments about which Japanese government records should be preserved for future generations will be undoubtedly difficult. Criteria must be completed by the next fiscal year. At present, NAJ archivists and government-trained personnel possessing archival capabilities are working together to prepare selection criteria so that archival records will be transferred practically and smoothly while also referring to administrative practices.

It should be noted that proper preparation and storage of records in government bodies is necessitated as a precondition for the transfer of archival records. The Act requires proper management, thus, of records even while currently being used at the office.

In addition to government bodies, the Act covers the transfer of important records from Incorporated Administrative Agencies. It also allows NAJ to accept donations and deposits from the private sectors. Consequently, NAJ can include more various records in its holdings than was previously possible, and thus it anticipates it will be able to secure a broad range of content.

## (2) Comprehensive provision of intellectual resources

Of course, even if a facility possesses valuable historical records, such records are meaningless if the facility does not provide access to them in an easy-to-use format. NAJ has a framework that allows the public to effectively use its holdings through a

variety of methods, among them the previously mentioned digital archives and exhibitions. Nonetheless, it must continue to consider new approaches.

One such approach is an integrated information supply with various other archives in Japan (e.g., archives of other central government bodies, local governments, and research institutes). If, for example, a user wishes to research a particular topic, he or she may not know where to find related materials. Consequently, the user may have to visit a variety of organizations, and if relevant materials are found in one or two of the organizations, the user may have to settle for them (even though other materials may be available in other organizations). To address the needs of such users, it would be desirable to have a framework supplying information on materials held in all archives in a systematic and crosscutting manner.

Another approach that should enhance convenience even more is a comprehensive supply of various intellectual resources that also includes those not necessarily found in archives, such as materials possessed by libraries or museums. Such an approach presents technical challenges, and will be, in particular, a topic for future consideration. Research toward these goals must be advanced to raise NAJ's value.

#### 2-4. Training and securing archivists to take charge of user services

An important issue behind implementation of the above approaches is the training and securing of highly capable archivists to take charge of user services for the public.

NAJ knows it must secure archivists and personnel who can provide proper referencing to visitors, can design practical catalogs as well as highly user-friendly digital archives. Consequently, NAJ intends to foster and secure outstanding archivists through effective training seminars and on-the-job training among other approaches.

### **3. Conclusion**

NAJ's third mid-term plan (FY2010 to FY2014) places particular emphasis on raising access to NAJ's holdings. In line with the plan, NAJ is using FY2010 to lay out a concrete schedule and make systematic advancements toward addressing pertinent issues. NAJ staff members will rigorously investigate "access" as it ought to become in the future.

The staff size of NAJ is very small compared to national archives in other countries. While rapidly increasing the number of staff members is surely difficult, NAJ intends to

fulfill its mission by continually training employees and maintaining high productivity.

All people involved in archives—including NAJ—have the same mission: to build up the archival world. Government bodies, various external organizations, scholars, and members of the general public that use archives, share a connection to the creation, transfer, preservation, and use of invaluable records, and support these activities.

NAJ hopes to bring the entire nation onboard in its effort to further develop itself as a public asset that is available for people to access and use.