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Tokyo's fight against the summer heat

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Anyone who has experienced the scorching heat and humidity of a Tokyo summer knows that without air conditioning everyday life would collapse. The average temperature in July and August rises over 30 degree Celsius in central Tokyo, the humidity reaches 70%. In July 2018, the highest temperature in Japan on record was measured close to Tokyo at 41.1 degrees. That summer a heat wave caused over 100 deaths by heatstroke and over 70,000 hospitalizations. Worries for the Olympic summer are not farfetched. Yet the original concept paper of the Japanese Olympic Committee claimed that during the timeframe from July to August “the mild weather is ideal for athletes to display their skills the best way possible.” Olympic test runs in 2019 have shown the effects of the extreme heat: high water temperatures leading to an explosion of e-coli bacteria in Tokyo Bay, Odaiba and triathlon runs shortened.

There is already a host of protective equipment against Japan's summer heat in everyday life: parasols, cooling pads, and air conditioning are as characteristic of the Japanese summer as fireworks and watermelons. Hand-held electric fans started to be the rage in 2019. The Cool Biz Campaign, started by the Ministry of Environment in 2005, encourages limited use of air conditioning and a liberal dress code adjusted to the summer heat. But these measures are hardly enough to protect athletes, volunteers, and foreign visitors, let alone the Japanese populace. Some countermeasures for the Games include water-sprinkling technology and tents to cover the entrance areas of Olympic sites. For the marathon, despite heat-mitigating strategies such as special pavement, planting trees, and changing the start time, after heat issues at the Doha World Athletics Championships, the IOC moved it to the northern city of Sapporo.

In further need for countermeasures, other official suggestions have included pushing clocks back by two hours by introducing “summer time,” asking stores to open their doors to cool down the area, and parasol hats for volunteers, all of which caused dismissal and ridicule, especially on social media. As extreme weather patterns continue to plague Japan, and the world for that matter, Tokyo's fight to control the heat continues. The possibility of other extreme weather, like a typhoon, would yet be another issue officials have to tackle.