

Satoyama:

The Satoyama Initiative & the Future

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In our ever shrinking world, management of resources and the environment is becoming paramount to our species', and many other species', survival. In Japan, there is a growing movement to revive traditional rural and agricultural landscapes known as *satoyama*. *Satoyama* is the unique man-made setting of hundreds of years of human agricultural influence in using and maintaining the lands in and around their village for the benefit of not only themselves, but also abundance of plants and animals, and for people in the future. Specifically, the Japanese Government has introduced the Satoyama Initiative with three goals in mind; become a low-carbon nation, resource circulating, and a nature harmonious society (Takeuchi, 2010). This Initiative is also trying to bring these kinds of ideas to nations all over the world to encourage sustainable societies. *Satoyama* has not been without its struggles. Due to many factors of modernization – aging and shrinking rural populations and changing land use – are negatively affecting *satoyama* efforts. In this essay, I would like to analyze the impacts of these issues on communities and examine the possible solutions to this unique Japanese landscape as it relates to Japan and abroad.

The most current crisis towards *satoyama* can be traced back to the 1960s and the so-called Energy Revolution when Japan began “increasing [the] use of fossil fuels and chemical fertilizer” instead of wood based fuel *satoyama* traditionally provided (Takeuchi, 2010, para. 15). Along with changing fuel needs, a shrinking domestic agriculture and greater opportunities in the cities are both causes and effects of the changing land use and depopulation in *satoyama* areas. Since *satoyama* makes up an “estimated 40% of all land in Japan” (Takeuchi, 2010, para. 14), this is a critical issue and impacts many communities, rural and urban.

One author suggests that the “the nationwide decline of agricultural productivity [stems] largely from a failed agro-policy pushing liberalization” (McGreevy, 2012, para. 2). While few

papers actually address the political policy side of *satoyama* issues, this seems like the most likely solution to one, reviving *satoyama*, and two, developing ways to integrate it into the national economy. Especially if one considers that “domestic food self-sufficiency [in Japan] is below 40%” and the subsequent “import dependency is an increasingly troubling fact of life” (Yokohari & Bolthouse, 2011, para. 5), the health of *satoyama* then appears to be an indicator of the nation’s overall wellbeing.

A trial experiment was done in the Saku district of Nagano Prefecture, Japan in 2004, which seemed to reveal the viability of restoring *satoyama* and meet the sustainable society desired by the Satoyama Initiative. This restoration impacted the local community by allowing them to provide all of their own lumber needs, 60% of their heating needs, and more than enough feed and fertilizer for themselves (Takeuchi, 2010, para. 25). The fact that the Saku district wasn’t previously meeting these needs, and using the *satoyama* model to its fullest, says a lot about the potential of *satoyama* in the local economy and how much the Saku community was in a state of declined productivity.

While all of the previously mentioned social issues can be blamed, there is another, less visible, reason these communities are in a state of decline: Biodiversity. When *satoyama* is being maintained and the succession of species is decided by man, in the case of *satoyama* this allows all life, plant, animal, and insect, to flourish. However, studies have shown that while Japanese “people recognize living organisms as important elements for Satoyama” (Iwata, Fukamachi, & Morimoto, 2011, para. 35), they do not understand or use the concept of biodiversity. Why is biodiversity so important? Naturalists would argue that higher diversity indicates a healthier system, but in the case of restoring and integrating *satoyama* into the Japanese economy, biodiversity is an indicator of resource-circulation - that is, recycling nutrients that keeps the

satoyama system working, potentially indefinitely. Also, I would argue that since the Japanese recognize the importance of animals that there is the added benefit of mental and spiritual health gained from this environment, in addition to the improved vitality and productivity of the community by restoring *satoyama*.

When trying to come up with a solution to many issues threatening *satoyama*, there are several different perspectives to keep in mind. There are current and would-be farmers working in *satoyama* areas to consider. There are also the naturalists who organize to preserve these areas (Natori & Chenoweth, 2008). And increasingly important is the Japanese economy and the Japanese public itself. Increased understanding is critical between all of these groups if any government policies are to be effective. It has been noted that farmers shown pictures of unmanaged woods frequently responded that “[they] feel upset because these woods look just like [their] own” (Natori & Chenoweth, 2008, para. 47). And while naturalists and farmers have different views on how rice paddies should be managed, both agreed that managed forests were preferable.

As Kazuhito Takeuchi, a “member of a special committee of the Central Environmental Council on Environmental Nation Strategy in the 21st Century” (Takeuchi, 2010, para. 2), points out, while the preservation and restoration of *satoyama* is admirable, “mere protection of *satoyama* areas is not enough” (para. 13). The true key to the future success of *satoyama* lies in integrating the model into the economy so there are both monetary and resource benefits and incentives to maintain this model into the future. This declaration surprised me because most environmental policies seem to put short-term economic strains on the nation in question. But by including the *satoyama* model effectively into the economy, the potential growth goes beyond local communities like in the Saku District. This is all encouraging rhetoric, but what concrete

steps will allow *satoyama* to become integrated into the Japanese economy? Since the population in *satoyama* rural areas is such a problem, which seems like the first logical step. Numbers are needed to have the manpower to restore *satoyama* to maintained level and thus productive in the market. At the same time however in order to draw people there, there needs to be enough incentives to move there. I'm not talking about money handouts, though that may help, but what I'm referring to is a solid support system for the farmers in those communities, especially in the economic viability of selling their crops. So if the moneymaking isn't there, people are less likely to take up this lifestyle. This presents an interesting challenge of getting enough people to start the process of improvement, and supporting these newcomers in this fledgling market. Since it is a bit of a Catch-22 situation where one is linked irrevocably to the other, government support is going to be crucial. There should be an added emphasis on community support and locally run organizations that potentially get monetary support, training, and equipment. It seems then that the government policies should try to align with growing corporate farming companies that ensure salaries for new farmers, as well as support local organizations. In addition to these policies, so as to not allow others to take advantage of the system at the disadvantage of others, self-policing in mandatory organizations could potentially work. The emphasis in these rural seems to traditionally be "community," because sharing knowledge, resources, and engaging in frequent communication builds a healthy lifestyle and a healthier, adaptable community. Finally, it must be remembered that the Satoyama Initiative and its precepts are the basis for which the *satoyama* movement to follow, or at the very least, for the government. The benefits of a long-term oriented resource-circulating society and economy far outweighs the short-term gains of exploiting nature for monetary gains or neglecting the beneficial cyclical balance established by farmers in Japan over hundreds of years.

There are many potential ways to help Japan's shrinking *satoyama* landscapes and I am confident that environmental groups will continue their efforts to revitalize these areas. However, I feel there are several important things that can, and should, be done to promote the long-term revitalization and commitment to *satoyama*. One, the education and involvement of the public, particularly in urban areas. *Satoyama* not only promises to benefit their economy but also their physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing, as well as their sense of national identity in our shrinking world. Two, research and widely publish findings on incorporating *satoyama* into the Japanese economy. This, along with number three – effective government action – could encourage companies to invest time and energy into *satoyama*, and greatly improve support for local farmers and their numbers. Government action is perhaps the most important and the most variable. Effective government promotion based on research findings seems like the path to a sustainable *satoyama*. Lastly, I think that lessons from studying *satoyama* and the Satoyama Initiative in Japan can be applied on a Global scale. True, each place will be unique in its situation, but many have similarities of decreased agricultural sector or endangered traditional knowledge in the face of growing populations and economies. The goals of the Satoyama Initiative are something to aspire to and the concept of integrating it into the economy makes it more viable as the future of our land and resources looks grim.

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