

# The concept of *satoyama* - Its role in the contemporary discourse on nature conservation in Japan

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## What is *satoyama*?

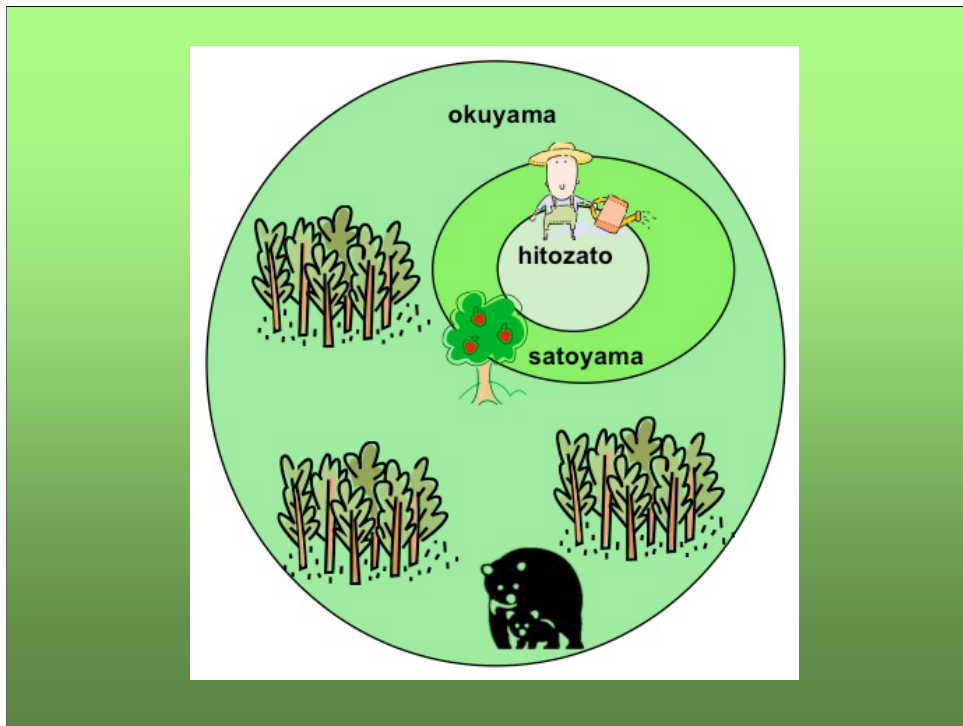
- Literally, “village mountain(s)” 里山
- Semi-managed woodland surrounding human settlements, especially rural ones
- Traditionally, source of food (herbs, berries, nuts, fungi), fuel-wood, fertiliser
- Increasingly extended to “the rural landscape” generally
- In urban areas, refers to remnant woodlands or “neighbourhood nature”

•Read through bullets

•This paper focuses on first definition, i.e., semi-managed woodland surrounding rural settlements



- Here is a “typical” example of a landscape that includes satoyama: terraced paddy fields in the foreground, the forested hills (or yama) in the background, and the mixed woodlands (satoyama) in between.
- Confusingly however, the term is increasingly applied by some to this entire landscape, including farms and rural villages, to mean “traditional rural landscape”
- This paper will focus on the former, more specific, application of the term



This is a graphic representation of satoyama, shown in relation to hitozato (lit. human village) and okuyama (lit. interior mountains), the forested uplands and mountains of inland Japan

## *Satoyama* in cultural context

- *Satoyama* is semi-tamed, safe and predictable sphere of nature
- Used in contradistinction to *okuyama* 奥山 (lit., “interior mountains”)
- Folktales largely take place in *satoyama*
- Visual arts, poetry etc: animals of *satoyama* feature prominently
- *Satoyama* has strongly influenced Japanese concept of nature *shizen* 自然

-*Satoyama* is seen as a semi-tamed, safe and predictable sphere of nature, unlike the mysterious, “wild” and “uncontrolled” nature of the deep forests of the mountain interior of Japan. It has functioned as an intermediary, or buffer zone, between the “other world” of the deep forest and the human world

-In his study of the Japanese relationship with forests, Kitamura (1995) suggests that the pivotal role of the *satoyama* in Japanese culture is reflected in the fact that it is the *satoyama*, rather than the *okuyama*, that is the setting for most Japanese folktales which feature animals and aspects of nature.

-The cultural significance of *satoyama* is also reflected in the fact that in literature and visual arts, creatures that inhabit *satoyama*, such as deer, rabbits and raccoon dogs, feature prominently, while bears, wolves and serow, which all inhabit the “interior mountains” do not.

-It is *satoyama*, as opposed to the ‘wild nature’ encompassed by *okuyama*, that has strongly influenced the Japanese concept of nature. Kitamura suggests that the much vaunted “Japanese love of nature” is borne out of the traditional Japanese interaction with *satoyama* (as opposed to the ‘real nature’ of the *okuyama*).

## *Satoyama* in global context

- UK, Europe: long tradition of coppice woodlands
- US: “wildland-urban interface” result of recent urban development
- Korea: *dongsan* “village mountains”, closest conceptually & geographically to *satoyama*

•Next, turning to the concept of *satoyama* in the global context. And in particular the question as to whether a similar category of nature exists in other countries. Here are some specific examples that I have found.

•In the UK, coppice woodlands were historically used for many applications: for the grazing of animals, to make charcoal for metal smelting, timber for building, roof thatching material and wattle fencing

•Unlike the case in Europe and Japan, in the US, the sphere of nature which most closely approximates *satoyama* is recently created space, having emerged where urban development and wilderness interface

•As far as I can ascertain, the Korean concept and geographical space is closest to the Japanese one. Like the Japanese terms *satoyama* and *okuyama*, *dongsan*, meaning “village mountains” is used in a contrasting sense with *yasan*, meaning “wild mountains”. This striking similarity appears (at least to me) to be more than can be explained by coincidence, rather it appears to point to the possibility of a common provenance, and certainly an aspect worthy of further investigation.

## Post-war decline of *satoyama*

- Advent of chemical fertilisers and modern fuel sources
- Rural depopulation and ageing
- Decline of agriculture and forestry
- *Satoyama* no longer cultivated or managed
- *Satoyama* destroyed for residential development

•The function of satoyama declined in the decades following WW2 as a result of technological, demographic and socio-economic factors.

•Firstly, the advent of chemical fertilizers, electricity, oil and gas meant that satoyama became less important as a source of fuel-wood, charcoal and organic fertilizer.

•Secondly, increasing urbanisation and rapid industrialisation led to steady depopulation of rural, and especially upland, areas throughout Japan. In particular, younger workers moved to urban centres in search of more lucrative sources of income.

•As a result, rural towns and villages have not only been left with diminishing populations but ageing ones also.

•Near urban centres, large areas of satoyama woodlands were destroyed in the 1960s and 70s to create so-called 'bed towns', or satellite commuter towns, especially around Tokyo and Osaka

## *Satoyama* in nature conservation discourse

- Many NGOs focused on preservation & regeneration of *satoyama*
- Focus of government policy & initiatives
- Frequent reference to *satoyama* in media, nature documentaries, films

• Many organisations focused on preserving or regenerating *satoyama* emerged in 1960s and 70s in reaction to increased urban development. It is estimated that as many as 500 such groups now exist.

• Such focus is not only limited to non-government organisations. *Satoyama* preservation has also become a salient theme in central and prefectural government policy and initiatives. For instance, the concept is central to the Environment Ministry's National Biodiversity Strategy. One of its 4 key goals is the "re-building [a] sound relationship between man and nature in local communities by selecting 'important *satoyama*' to develop management models".

• *Satoyama* also features prominently in the vision for the 10th conference of the International Convention on Biological Diversity, to be held in Aichi Prefecture, Japan in 2010

• In all these instances, the cultural as well as ecological value of *satoyama* is emphasised. For instance, many groups organise activities or educational programmes around such traditional economic and leisure activities as matsutake and shiitake mushroom cultivation, bamboo shoot harvesting and firefly viewing.

• Read third bullet.

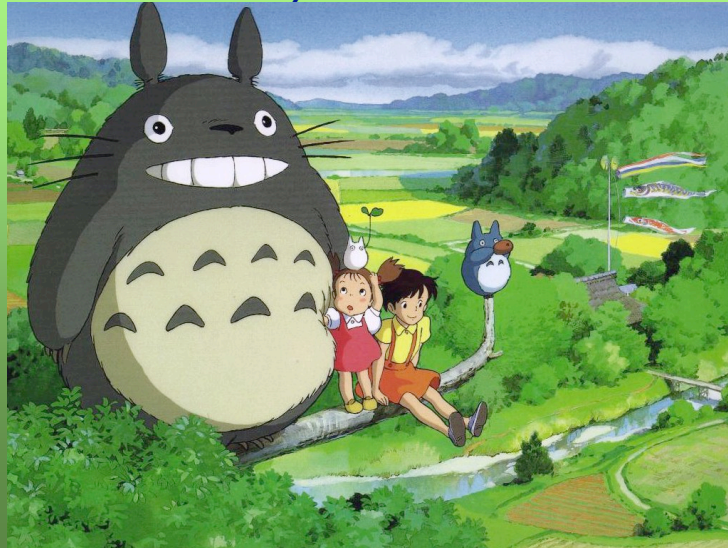
• In particular, there have been a number of films that have been immensely influential in capturing the Japanese imagination and placing the concept of *satoyama* firmly in the collective consciousness. The 2 films that we will briefly look at are "Raccoon Wars" and "My Neighbour Totoro"

## Nature (*satoyama*) vs development “The Raccoon Wars”



The battle between nature and development is vividly portrayed in Takahata Isao's animated film *Heisei Tanuki Gassen Pom Poko* (The Raccoon Wars), in which a colony of raccoon dogs living in the hills in the outskirts of Tokyo band together to fight against a suburban housing development threatening their *satoyama* habitat. Their resistance is sustained over many years, but ultimately fails to prevent the destruction of their hill habitat. What is striking about this film (and “Princess Mononoke” is similar in this respect) is the apparent inevitability of development and the concomitant destruction of nature to make way for ‘human progress’.

## “My neighbour Totoro”: *satoyama* icon



- Miyazaki Hayao’s “Tonari no Totoro” was an immensely popular animated film released in 1988 which captured the collective imagination as a celebration both of childhood innocence and the magic of nature
- It is a nostalgic portrayal of a rural lifestyle, where people live in harmony with nature
- The film has become so indelibly associated with the idea of satoyama, the Totoro character might be described as the icon or mascot of satoyama nature.
- The setting for the film was apparently based on the Sayama Hills on the outskirts of Tokyo, and, demonstrating how a film created primarily for entertainment value can become a powerful agent for social change, the film provided inspiration and impetus for a campaign to conserve the satoyama nature of the Sayama Hills area. This campaign, called the Totoro Hometown Fund Campaign トトロのふるさと基金, and launched in 1990, has proven very successful.



- The inspiration provided by the character Totoro has proven to be long-lived - one university (Meijo Univ, Nagoya) recently held public seminars called “Totoro and satoyama”.
- This photo from the university’s website is entitled “Parent-child satoyama nature classroom - observation of lumbering”

## *Satoyama* in discourse on human-wildlife conflict

- Wildlife damage to agriculture, forestry etc increasing problem
- Leads to “culling” of problem wildlife
- Attributed to:
  - degradation of wildlife habitat (esp. upland forests), resulting in depleted food sources
  - degradation of function of *satoyama* as “buffer zone” to “forest proper”

-Within the nature conservation discourse, the importance ascribed to the role of *satoyama* in human-wildlife conflict is particularly striking

-Human-wildlife conflict refers primarily to wildlife damage to agriculture, horticulture and forestry. This has become an increasing problem since WW2. Wildlife which commonly causes such damage includes deer, monkeys, wild-boar and bears. Trapping and culling are routine responses.

-Increased wildlife damage is attributed firstly to the degradation of wildlife habitat. This leads to depleted food sources and consequently to wildlife venturing in to human spheres to raid crops and even, on occasion, fridges!

-Secondly it is attributed to the breakdown of the traditional buffer function of the *satoyama*. As the human presence in the *satoyama* decreases and it becomes less human-managed and more overgrown, wildlife are more likely to see it as an extension of the forest proper and venture into it in search of food.

## *Satoyama* in discourse on human-wildlife conflict (2)

- In media coverage of bear and other wildlife damage, *satoyama* degradation emphasised
- Degradation of wildlife habitat (*okuyama*) acknowledged but not seen as primary factor

•For instance, in research I conducted of coverage of human-bear conflict in one major newspaper in 2004, *satoyama* degradation, rather than the decline of the bear's forest habitat itself was emphasised in the explanation for the high incidence of bear damage and attacks on humans that year. This also appeared to be the case in more general coverage of human-wildlife conflict.

•Read second bullet

## Why is *satoyama* emphasised in discourse?

- *Satoyama* associated with “traditional harmonious relationship” with nature
- Provides a comforting and more palatable explanation for increase human-wildlife conflict issue
- *Satoyama* is similar to concept of *furusato* 故里: comforting, nostalgic, sense of “belonging”

•As has been seen, in the discourse on nature conservation in Japan, the emphasis on *satoyama* appears to be disproportionate to its ecological value in comparison to the wilder nature of Japan’s upland forests, wetlands and so on. Why is this?

•The concept of *satoyama* supports the widely held view that the Japanese traditionally had a harmonious relationship with nature

•Supports a belief that the Japanese only have to return to their roots to resolve human-wildlife conflict & nature conservation issues

•In contrast, the acknowledgement of the capacity to destroy wilderness proper is disconcerting

•The strength of the nostalgia associated with *satoyama* may be understood within the context of what one Japanese scholar refers to as Japan’s “retrospective age” (Akatsuka 1988), which emerged in the 1970s, some suggest as a reaction to the oil shocks. This has led to a renewed interest in Japanese traditions and a nostalgia for the past. In particular, it is evident in the romanticisation of Japan’s heritage, as seen in the case of the “*furusato* movement”, which has involved widespread efforts to revitalise or recreate both the imagery and reality of the *furusato*, or “home village”.

•The visual imagery and nostalgic appeal of *furusato* overlaps significantly with that of *satoyama* (the two terms also share the same word for village—*sato*).

## Conclusions

- Like *furusato*, *satoyama* exemplifies the overlap between environment and culture
- Its cultural, rather than ecological, value has led to it becoming the focus of nature conservation efforts
- Underpins genuine desire to be seen as “worthy steward of nature”

• Like *furusato*, *satoyama* is very much a “cultural landscape” - whether real or imagined

• As a term, it has only in the last four decades come into common use - perhaps coinciding with the post-war/oil-shock re-evaluation of traditional culture (as in the case of the *furusato* phenomenon)

• In effect, *satoyama* has only become conceptualised as its very existence has become threatened - this may explain ambiguity in its definition - which varies widely in different contexts. Like *furusato*, it identifies an ideal that doesn't necessarily exist.

• While *satoyama* equivalents (such as the UK's coppice woodlands) exist physically in other cultures, I have found no examples of this realm existing both as a physical and cultural or socio-psychological realm, as it does in Japan. One possible exception is the *dongsan* concept in Korea, a possibility which needs further investigation.

• What does this tell us about the Japanese? Certainly, that their view of nature and the natural world is very much tied up with their view of their culture and themselves as a people.

• The emphasis on *satoyama* - and its regeneration and preservation - in the nature conservation discourse also, in my view, demonstrates a genuine desire by the Japanese to reforge a more harmonious relationship with nature and in doing so, prove to both itself and the international community that it is a worthy steward of nature.