

The Past and Present of the Grasslands

The Kuju Mountain Range, known as the “Roof of Kyushu,” has an average height of 1,700 m and contains the tallest peak on the island of Kyushu (Mt. Nakadake at 1,791 m). The range, created by ancient volcanic and seismic activity, has the Handa Plateau to the north and Kuju to the south, both situated at around 800 m above sea level. The altitude makes the area particularly cool in the summer.

Both the Handa and Kuju plateaus, created from volcanic ash and debris, are covered in broad grasslands. The grasslands are actively maintained by people through pasturing, mowing, and controlled springtime burnings, called *noyaki*. Without this management of the grasslands, trees would quickly move in, turning the land to forest, and the natural wealth of the grasslands would be lost.

In recent times, the grasslands have been shrinking in size as a result of the decline in the use of the grasses as fuel, animal feed, and thatch. Harvesting has been reduced, thus resulting in a corresponding loss of conservation. Grassland maintenance has also decreased as a result of the falling numbers of people in the area and subsequent decreases in land dedicated to agricultural use. Today, the preservation and regeneration of the grasslands is paramount. A volunteer program, in which volunteers from surrounding cities travel to the Aso-Kuju area to help with springtime burnings every year, is now in place.