

Yokokura Rice Paddies

For thousands of years, farmers in Japan have managed various types of local woodlands. Called *satoyama*, these wooded areas help protect the local watershed and played a vital role in the traditional Japanese agriculture system. Wood from the forest could be used as fuel, and fallen leaves made excellent fertilizer. Mushrooms and wild vegetables could be harvested in the woods, providing needed variety to an otherwise bland country diet.

The Yokokura terraced rice paddies are an excellent example of the *satoyama* system. In Shirakami Sanchi, water is collected by beech trees, eventually entering the water table or trickling down the mountains as streams and rivers. Water from rain and snowmelt accumulates in the mountains above Yokokura and bubbles out above the paddies. The spring water is so abundant that it is used to irrigate the fields below, and the terraces make it easy for farmers to maintain the water levels needed for wet rice agriculture.

The Yokokura terraced paddies are one of 50 areas of paddies that Akita Prefecture has recognized as worth protecting, and there are community events to help the few remaining farmers maintain their fields and conserve the landscape. In Akita, Shirakami Sanchi functions as a *satoyama* for much of the land that surrounds it. The beech trees return a massive amount of water into the soil and the other plants that grow in the buffer zone (the area that surrounds the core zone of the Shirakami Sanchi World Heritage Site) are used by farmers as fertilizer and food.