

## What Is a *Satoyama*?

About three-fourths of Japan is mountainous. Historically, the scarcity of easily settled flat land led to resourceful local adaptations for farming and living in remote mountainous areas. Communities developed specialized traditions to meet the challenges of their locale and take advantage of close proximity to the mountain wilderness. Such villages were called *yamasato*, and the harvested fields and forests surrounding them were termed *satoyama*.

An example of traditional *satoyama* practice is coppicing. Local residents cut down oaks and other fast-growing deciduous trees every 10 to 20 years to supply wood for charcoal. The trees are then allowed to regrow, with new shoots repeatedly springing from old stumps. The shoots regenerate quickly using energy stored in the trees' root systems. As a result, coppiced trees grow back to harvestable size much faster than if they had been replanted from seeds or seedlings. Leaves and fallen branches on the forest floor are collected annually to supply fuel and fertilizer.

*Satoyama* land-management practices reflect a way of life that exists in balance with nature, and they play a significant role in maintaining local biodiversity. For example, rice fields, reservoirs, and irrigation canals provide feeding and breeding grounds for resident and migratory birds, and they are vital to the life cycles of creatures like frogs, fireflies, and dragonflies. The harvest of tall grasses for roof thatching promotes the regeneration of smaller wildflowers that would otherwise struggle to compete for sunlight. In *satoyama*, people have found ways to meet their own needs while coexisting with, and even supporting, native species.

*Satoyama* practices are becoming rarer today, as populations age and young people choose urban over rural lives. Still, many people retain an idyllic image of traditional lifestyles and landscapes. A number of organizations are currently working to preserve the *satoyama* way of life or apply its wisdom to the development of communities that make use of the environment while preserving biodiversity. One example is the Satoyama Initiative, a joint project between the Ministry of the Environment and the United Nations University Institute for the Advanced Study of Sustainability.