

Woodcutters (*Somafu*)

Logging has been an integral part of life in the mountain forests of Shirakami Sanchi for centuries. Although the timber industry in the area has declined, its impact on local culture is still widespread.

Woodcutters, known in the local dialect as *somafu*, have worked in the region's forests for centuries. Before the advent of railways, they dragged huge bundles of logs down from the mountains by hand (a process called *bajizori*) or on sleds pulled by horses (called *donbiki*). In 1911 the first train tracks were built to transport the wood more easily, and the rail lines were actively expanded until the early 1940s. Unfortunately, severe flooding in 1963 swept away many of the tracks, and the lines were subsequently abandoned. Today, lumber is usually loaded by crane onto trucks for transport.

In addition to professional woodcutters, traditional bear hunters (*matagi*) also felled trees. The beliefs and practices of the *matagi* are partly religious, and they regard the bears and the deer-like Japanese serow they hunt as gifts of the mountain gods. The population of *matagi* is aging and dwindling, and the culture is preserved mostly through hunts organized for tourists.

Local forests are home to approximately 100 tree species, but Akita's timber industry has always centered around Japanese cedar, referred to as *Akita sugi*. Mountain cherry (used in high-end construction for its strength and glossy finish), Japanese chestnut (used in construction and furniture due to its water resistance), Japanese birch (made into pianos and plane propellers), and Manchurian walnut (used in luxury furniture and flooring) are also harvested.

The Furusato Shizenkōen Center, a local museum and information center on the eastern shore of Lake Subari, displays many traditional tools used by *somafu*, as well as videos and images portraying their work in the forest. The center also has free wi-fi and private spaces designed for remote work.