

Rice Terraces of Yaeji

The rice terraces of Yaeji are nestled deep in the hills of the westernmost area of Kamikatsu. They form a network of 468 rice paddies, each of which has an area of approximately 250 square meters. The terraced fields represent an enduring heritage; one that has balanced preserving the historical landscape with the challenges of an aging population.

Unchanging Scenery

Yaeji is free of tour buses and crowds, keeping it a quiet refuge and a place of well-preserved history. A total of 34 of the 42 houses shown on an 1813 map of Yaeji still stood in the same locations as of 2011, including the Tanaka Family Residence and the Hanano Residence. A stroll through narrow roads and alleys offers views of many such houses surrounded by stone walls, as well as Chorakuji Temple, stone monuments, and many shrines. In fact, there are 22 shrines in this small settlement that enshrine the gods of mountains, water, and farming. These gods protect people's livelihoods, and the large number of shrines dedicated to them is a testament to the importance of these guardian deities to area farmers.

Harmony with Nature

The terraces are in a band on the lower slopes of Mt. Takamaru at elevations between 550 and 650 meters. Higher up on the mountain, rain that falls in the beech forest is retained in the soil and feeds springs that flow down to the fields in Yaeji. The forests thus provide the water critical for farming, which in turn helps sustain people's livelihoods. Yaeji also provides a habitat for a wide variety of plants and animals like the Japanese white eye songbird (*Zosterops japonicus*). This approach of balanced interests has earned national recognition. The rice terraces of Yaeji and Mt. Takamaru were designated an Important Satochi-Satoyama Site by the Ministry of the Environment in 2009. A *satochi-satoyama* site is characterized by interactions between settlements, secondary forests, rice paddies, and irrigation canals, and plays an important role in biodiversity conservation.

Curved Terraces

The original shapes of the paddies were small and irregular and unsuited for agricultural machinery use. Cultivation by hand was necessary, adding further to the burden of farmers dealing with a declining labor force. In 1998, Tokushima Prefecture adopted a plan, with agreement from the local Yaeji community, to consolidate and create larger, rectangular paddies to allow for mechanization. However, concerns were expressed that this plan would lead to the loss of the traditional scenery. Tokushima Prefecture thus proposed another plan—a pioneering land consolidation model that increases farming efficiency while maintaining the aesthetic beauty of the curved terraces. For more information, see “Yaeji Land Consolidation Project.”