

Old Mountain Life

Charcoal Production

Kamikatsu was once a charcoal production center. Wood cut from the surrounding forests was burned in kilns to make charcoal for sale and for use at home. Four of those charcoal kilns survive and offer modern evidence of traditional mountain life, as does the restored trail between Mt. Takamaru and the old Kashihara settlement. The restored trail is approximately seven kilometers long and allows hikers of today to follow the same route taken by the people of Kashihara long before the modern age. It offers a taste of the hard work involved in the business of making charcoal deep in the woods, which had to be carried down the mountain on foot to be sold in Sakamoto (now Katsuura), nearly 20 kilometers away. The Sennen no Mori Fureai-Kan organizes demonstrations of the charcoal production process from start to finish in November and December.

Forests and Local Lifestyles

Before World War II, Kamikatsu had many secondary forests with a variety of trees, including Japanese chestnut oak, zelkova, hinoki cypress, and Japanese cedar. Secondary forests are ones that have regenerated following human or natural disturbance and may seem less environmentally friendly than forests untouched by humans, but those views are disputed. Human woodland management helped keep secondary forests healthy by preventing vines from interfering with tree growth, ensuring that sunlight streams through the trees, and cutting down older trees so new growth can sprout from their stumps. Those coppiced trees can support local lifestyles, completing the forest management cycle. These local forests provided people with much more than just charcoal, as well. They helped supply water for farming, wild plants and mushrooms for food, and wood for cooking and making farming and household tools. People in Kamikatsu took advantage of the characteristics of various woods for specific uses. For example, cedar absorbs moisture, so it was used to make large rice containers; cypress was used for cutting boards due to its anti-bacterial properties; Japanese mountain cherry was perfect for doorsills for its resilience; paulownia makes excellent clothes chests because it controls humidity, and Japanese blue oak was carved into farming tool handles due to its durability.