

Unique Aspects of the Tsuta Forest

The Decline of Japan's Beech Forests

Beech forests have covered much of northern Japan's mountainous landscape since ancient times. Beeches have traditionally been considered useless as a building material, however, because they grow slowly and the cut timber decays quickly. Great swathes of the forests were therefore cleared and replaced by cedar plantations. Today, most of Japan's remaining beech forests are in remote or inaccessible locations, such as the Shirakami and Hakkoda Mountains.

A Rare History of Regeneration

In the Tsuta area, several factors combined to regenerate the beech forests. The climate was too cold for agriculture in the lowlands, given the methods of cultivation in those earlier days. Farms concentrated instead on raising cattle and horses. When much of the arable land was purchased by the Japanese military in the early twentieth century, local farmers had to move their livestock to graze in the mountains of Tsuta and nearby Hakkoda. The animals mostly fed on *sasa*, a kind of dwarf bamboo with thin stems and large leaves. This left an airy, open forest floor where beech seedlings easily established themselves. It also improved access to the forest, enabling people to harvest the trees for firewood and to make charcoal. Management of the forest, which included logging trees to allow sunlight to reach the forest floor and leaving unusable trees uncut, lasted until the 1960s. Today, the Tsuta Forest is a rare example of human intervention creating an environment that naturally facilitated the renewal and survival of beech trees.

[Box]

What's in a Name?

Beech wood was not suitable as a building material, and was mainly used for firewood or charcoal. Vines (*tsuta*), which thrive in sunlit spaces, came to dominate parts of the forest that had been cleared by logging. Once far more prevalent in the area than they are today, these vines are probably what gave the Tsuta Forest its name.