

Ago Bay: Landscape, History, and Culture

Ago Bay is a calm, sheltered bay at the southeast tip of Mie Prefecture. Its jagged ria coastline and mosaic of islands have attracted sightseers for centuries. The Yokoyama View Point area, located on a hillside, offers panoramic views of the bay from as high as 140 meters above sea level.

The topography of Ago Bay was created by a rare combination of geological processes. Hundreds of millions of years ago, plate tectonics began to push the seabed upward. During the last glacial period, it rose above sea level and formed a landscape of rivers and valleys. When the glacial period ended roughly 10,000 years ago, these valleys were partly submerged by the sea and became Ago Bay's distinctive terraced ria inlets, while isolated peaks formed more than 50 large and small islands.

Ago Bay and the Yokoyama area constitute one of the areas within Ise-Shima National Park where traditional coastal ways of life are preserved. Formed by processes that began tens of millions of years ago and then further shaped by human habitation, the landscape is living proof of the possibilities of sustainable environmental management.

Ago Bay is a *satoumi*, a coastal area where residents derive their livelihood from the ocean. Like other *satoumi*, the bay is managed for productivity, biodiversity, and sustainability. Its waters are nourished by nutrients from mountain flora, warmed by the Kuroshio Current offshore, and sheltered by the peninsula that stretches west to Cape Goza. As a result, the bay has long supported a range of industries and lifestyles.

Today the bay supports the farming of a variety of green laver called *aosa nori*, as well as pearl cultivation on raft fleets and in work sheds along the island shorelines. Just outside the mouth of the bay, female divers known as *ama* gather shellfish, sea cucumbers, and seaweed from the rocky seabed. Law and custom discourage overfishing, so as to preserve the *satoumi* and its resources for future generations.

The densely forested slopes of Mt. Yokoyama have their own history of sustainable management as a multi-use woodland or *satoyama*. Residents used the hard, dense wood of the ubame-gashi oak to make *binchotan*, a kind of hard charcoal. The ring-cupped oak (*ara-kashi*) was used for firewood.