

The Kuma River

Hitoyoshi is surrounded by mountains, and while they provided a natural defense for the castle town, they made transport and trade difficult. In response, in the late seventeenth century, the Kuma River was developed as a major waterway and helped spur economic growth in the region.

Natural obstructions were cleared and the river was improved for boat traffic under the direction of Sagara Yoritaka (1641–1703), the 22nd head of the Sagara family. The project took several years and was finished in 1664. Boats were then able to pass safely between Hitoyoshi and Yatsushiro, a castle town and trading post at the mouth of the river, around 50 kilometers northwest of Hitoyoshi.

The development of the river benefited the Sagara and ordinary people in many ways. Travel to the capital, Edo (now Tokyo), became easier and quicker. Communities could deliver their annual tributes (taxes paid in rice) to the Sagara lords directly to the castle gate that faced the river, and beyond which were two rice-storage houses. The Sagara also commissioned irrigation systems to channel river water to rice fields further inland. More land for rice farming led to increased yields, which further contributed to the power of the Sagara and the economic wealth of the region.

From the late nineteenth century, Japan modernized rapidly, and widespread development created an increased demand for timber. Logging became a lucrative industry along the river, and timber was transported downstream in the form of log rafts. The industry ultimately declined as modern construction materials became more readily available. However, this coincided with the growth of the domestic tourism industry, and timber rafts were gradually replaced with pleasure boats and, more recently, with whitewater rafts and stand-up paddle boards.