

## **Wetlands of Omihachiman**

The wetlands of Omihachiman are a protected area of 354 hectares between Lake Biwa and the town of Omihachiman, comprising an intricate landscape of waterways, reedbeds, rice paddies, and villages. The wetlands were formed over centuries as humans created waterways for transport and fishing and cultivated reedbeds for a variety of craft industries. The wetlands are called *suigo* in Japanese, a word that can be translated as “water home” and which expresses the close relationship between the landscape and people’s everyday life. The wetlands of Omihachiman have been named a National Important Cultural Landscape.

### *The origin of the wetlands*

A network of waterways that run through the wetlands connects the Hachimanbori Moat with Lake Biwa and its small subsidiary lake, Nishinoko. The origin of this network is closely connected to the history of the town. In 1585, the warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598) ordered his nephew Toyotomi Hidetsugu (1568–1595) to build a castle on Mt. Hachimanyama as a center of control over Omi Province. Hidetsugu established the town of Hachiman (now Omihachiman) below the castle and invited merchants and craftsmen to settle there. He had the Hachimanbori Moat dug to protect the castle and to connect the town with Lake Biwa to facilitate commerce. Hidetsugu is also said to have begun the tradition of recreational boating on the waterways when he held a tea gathering on a boat in imitation of the aristocratic traditions of entertaining on boats.

### *Reed cultivation and wetland maintenance*

A distinctive feature of the wetlands is the reedbeds that line the waterways. The reeds can reach a height of up to 5 meters and are famous for their sturdiness. Reed cultivation has been an important source of income in the area for hundreds of years. The reeds were traditionally used to make a variety of screens and blinds and to thatch roofs, and as a construction material. Screens made of reeds are also used in tea farming to shelter tea bushes from direct sunlight. Historically, reed products were traded throughout Japan by merchants based in Hachiman (now Omihachiman), which brought significant wealth to the town. Although the demand for reed products is no longer what it once was, villages in the wetlands continue to keep the traditional reed craft industry alive. Reeds are still needed when the roofs of historic buildings are re-thatched; new uses have been developed for paper products such as business cards and stationery, and even producing a powder used as an ingredient in noodles and ice cream.

The reedbeds perform several important natural functions. Reeds grow in colonies with thick root systems that provide a habitat and breeding ground for wild birds and fish. They also play a role in protecting the lakeshore from erosion, cleansing the water of pollutants, and absorbing excess nutrients like nitrogen and phosphorus that run off from nearby farmland. As Lake Biwa is a major source of drinking water in the region, this cleansing effect is highly valued.

Though the wetlands may appear to be an untouched wilderness, they are in fact a managed landscape that has been nurtured and cultivated for hundreds of years. In February and March the reedbeds are cleared by controlled burning, one important method of wetland management. Burning away dead reeds controls pests and plant diseases, promotes fresh growth, and prevents the reedbeds from becoming overgrown with willow trees. It also creates an opportunity for other plants and flowers to grow in the spring.

#### *Omihachiman wetlands as an Important Cultural Landscape*

Once common throughout Japan, wetlands such as those in Omihachiman are increasingly scarce. The loss of wetland ecosystems was particularly swift during the post–World War II period of rapid economic growth, when demand for reed products declined dramatically and large swaths of wetlands were reclaimed for use as farmland. The municipality of Omihachiman has sought to protect its wetlands, and these efforts were rewarded when its wetlands were named Japan’s first Important Cultural Landscape in 2005. This designation highlights landscapes that have developed together with the way of life and livelihood of local residents and should therefore be preserved for future generations. The wetlands of Omihachiman were recognized because the people of the wetlands have lived in harmony with their environment for hundreds of years, and because that environment is indispensable to the reed industry, their traditional livelihood.