

## **Aragijima Rice Terraces**

At a tight bend in the Arida River, fifty-odd rice paddies have been cut into the hillside. These are the Aragijima Rice Terraces, which provide precious arable land amid the mountainous terrain of central Wakayama Prefecture. In recognition of the site's cultural significance and natural beauty, the government designated the Aragijima Rice Terraces and surrounding districts an Important Cultural Landscape in 2013.

Cultural Landscapes are invaluable examples of how the environment of a particular region shapes the livelihoods, history, and culture of its residents, who in turn shape the region's topography. The designation provides the area with financial support for preservation, research, and education under the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties.

## *Life-Giving Water Source*

The terraces date from 1655, when rice was not only a food staple but also

a form of currency for paying taxes. A forward-thinking village headman named Kasamatsu Satayū (1598–1673) saw the connection between rice production and prosperity, and he developed more rice paddies to enrich his community.

As part of his efforts, Satayū personally funded the construction of the 3.2-kilometer-long Uwayu Irrigation Canal. Building the canal took both technical knowledge and extensive labor, but it provided a source of fresh water for rice cultivation in Aragijima and other low-lying areas. The original, clay-lined canal required frequent monitoring and maintenance. It was reinforced with concrete following a flood in 1953, and it is still in use today.

Fresh water from the canal also supported the development of the handmade paper (*washi*) industry, which brought more wealth to the area. The region's thick, durable paper, known as "Yasudagami," is made from the fibers of *kōzo* mulberry trees. At Aragijima, farmers began to grow *kōzo*

on the embankments between rice paddies. Yasudagami was once made mainly into umbrellas and fans, but it is now also used to make cards, envelopes, and various other products.

### *In Harmony with Nature*

The Aragijima Rice Terraces are an important habitat for water-loving plants and animals that were once common in mountain villages, such as the Japanese fire-bellied newt, a near-threatened species in Wakayama Prefecture. From simple waterweeds to birds of prey, Aridagawa's rice paddies teem with life. This is becoming increasingly important as more terraced rice fields are abandoned due to depopulation and rural restructuring.