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Towards New Forms of Environmental Ethics: Satoyama Landscape Revitalization and the Cultural Politics of Knowledge Translation

In recent years, Japanese citizens have mobilized to restore traditional *satoyama* landscapes as a strategy to fight the damages that modern life was thought to inflict on both humans and the environment. In the satoyama revitalization movement, middle-class professionals, retirees, and students intermingle with farmers and use their spare time to plant rice, clear irrigation channels, and, most particularly, reenact the traditional resource use in village forests once heavily used for fuel and green fertilizer. In contrast to North American calls for wilderness protection, Japanese nature enthusiasts imagine traditional agrarian landscapes not only as the locus of “harmony between humans and nature,” but also as the site for biodiversity conservation.

This ethnographic project traces one especially vigorous wing of the satoyama revitalization movement: the mobilization to recreate the forests that produce highly valued matsutake mushrooms. In Japan, the matsutake has long been a highly valued food, seen as one of Japan’s national culinary legacies. Although most matsutake are now imported, they have now become simultaneously an icon of nostalgic agrarian lifestyles and cosmopolitan forward-looking biodiversity conservation project. What kind of trans-local and transnational networks of biodiversity conservation have emerged along the development of the global commodity of matsutake?

The aims of this project are: (1) to analyze the network of citizens’ grassroots satoyama landscape revitalization projects; (2) to examine how their activities produce new environmental ethics; and (3) to explore how satoyama revitalization movements reconfigure the relationship between traditional environmental knowledge and scientific knowledge.

This study makes a critical contribution to debates on the politics of knowledge on biodiversity conservation. The literature in anthropology of science and social and cultural studies of science has pointed out that, while modern science claims its universality and neutrality, scientific knowledge is culturally constructed and socially situated. Recent scholarship on postcolonial science has argued that the urgent issue in this transnationally intertwined world is not only pointing out the situatedness of scientific knowledge, but also to interrogate how hierarchies of knowledge are produced and transformed, and how exactly various kinds of knowledge are mediated, articulated and re-articulated in specific social contexts. This project responds to this call, documenting how the actors of satoyama projects translate various knowledge traditions, and articulate specific visions, ethics, and knowledges around biodiversity conservation.