

A Historical Perspective for Mountainous Landscape in Hida, Central Japan

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Abstract

Conflagrations always give tremendous impacts to biomass of local environments and alter landscapes. In our time, firing is considered dangerous for citizen's lives and property and a cause of environment problems, such as air pollution and global warming. The technology of fire, however, made it possible for humans to make artificial landscape, such as forests and grasslands, since the early stage of history. In this paper I would like to introduce ethnological and historical examples of fire from slash-and-burn agriculture in Japan comparing with grassland-burning by the Aborigine people in Australia, and then provides a historical perspective of fire technology in creating landscapes.

Slash- and-burn agriculture was popular in Japan until 1960's, especially in mountainous area. In 1936, one hundred fifty thousand households managed a total of eight million square kilometer burnt field. The Hida region is an administrative unit before the Meiji period, located in the northern part of present Gifu prefecture. "Hidagofudoki (A New Geographical Description and History of Hida)" was published in 1873. It contains detailed records of products from the mid 19th century, before the industrialization of Japan. There were 415 villages, from which 455 products are listed, often with quantitative data: cultivated crops, wild food stuffs, craft products, and other miscellanea, as well as data on population, households, temples and shrines. The Hida was an active region with slash-and-burn, and cultivations of millets are recorded in 403 villages.

It also discusses a recent tendency of attempting to revitalise "traditional" mountain-burning that is widely seen in Japan such as Mt. Wakakusa in Nara. These attempts are conducted not only in the name of restoring sustainable ways of life in the past, but also aiming to create attractive tourist resources.

Keywords: Hida region; historical perspective; mountain-burning; mountainous landscape; slash-and-burn agriculture; technology of fire