



Threatened landscapes unite rural and urban communities

In the past 50 years, about a quarter of Japan's cultivated land has been lost, threatening food production, cultural landscapes and biodiversity. One of Japan's most valued cultural landscapes includes rice terraces. In order to prevent them from abandonment, an innovative concept known as the Ownership System, was devised almost 25 years ago. This has today become a national movement based on the cooperation between rural and urban communities who combine food production with landscape conservation, cultural activities and environmental education.

Pia Kieninger and Marianne Penker

Japan is one of the most urbanised countries in the world where rural communities are rapidly shrinking and aging. About three quarters of nation's population live in cities, each located in the few flat areas of this otherwise mountainous country. Japan is the 'oldest' country worldwide, with 25% of the population being 65 or older, and the average farmer is close to 70 years old. The problem of shrinking and aging rural populations across the country led to the creation of the term, *genkai shūroku*, literally translated as 'communities on the edge of existence'.

As rural communities grow ever smaller, land is abandoned, infrastructure is lost, and traditional Japanese cultural landscapes known as *satoyama*, degrade. In the national biodiversity strategy, the "lack of human influence" in *satoyama* is highlighted as one of the top three biodiversity crises and the role of civil society to protect landscapes is emphasised. Rice terraces (*tanada*) are particularly important in *satoyama*, yet about 40% of the country's rice terraces are abandoned. Apart from food production, they are hotspots of biodiversity and cultural identity. Many people perceive them as the landscape most close to them and they feel attracted to them due to their high cultural

and aesthetic value. *Tanada* are landscapes of their ancestors, culture, tradition, (spiritual) homeland and important places for national identity.

The Ownership System Civic movements to save *satoyama* started in the 1980s, firstly by mainly supporting forestry, as cultivation of agricultural land was restricted by law to farmers only. But to support civic engagement on farmland, the government suspended these restrictions in a number of special districts.

The first *Tanada* Ownership System started in Yusu-hara on Shikoku island in 1992. The Ownership System later became a national movement, where mainly city dwellers, called ‘owners’, rent agricultural land in order to cultivate it under the well-organised support of local farmers and other experts. Among all the different types of Ownership Systems, those focusing on rice production are most popular. In 2008, 187 *Tanada* Ownership Systems were officially registered across Japan, but the actual number might be even higher. The foundation of many *Tanada* Ownership Systems coincided with the Agricultural Ministry’s award for the top 100 terraced paddy fields of Japan that highlights outstanding scenic beauty and sustainable use. This award brought publicity and visitors to the rice terraces, but it also raised local pride and encouraged them to engage in conservation activities.

Tanada Ownership Systems all over Japan share the same principles, but organisation, size and participation fees differ. In the area of Kamogawa City, close to

greater Tōkyō, there are at least seven Ownership Systems. One of these, the Ōyamasenmaida *Tanada* Ownership System in Chiba Prefecture, is commonly regarded as a best practice example. The experiences of locals and city dwellers participating in this system are presented here.

The old farmers possess a lot of knowledge to offer the city people

Ōyamasenmaida Ōyamasenmaida is a mountainous rice terrace landscape around 100 km south-east of Tōkyō. Over 400 terraces, ranging in size from 20 to 900 m², extend up a south-east slope. They belong to the hamlet of Kogane, numbering less than 20 households. With an aging population, this region lacks farm successors, owing in part to the uneconomically small scale of the paddy fields. In 1997, landowners and other locals founded the NPO ‘Ōyamasenmaida Preservation Association’ and initiated a *Tanada* Ownership System to safeguard their rice terraces. The founders saw the Ownership System as a win-win for the region. The director explained, “the ownership system is the right way because the small paddy fields are big enough for city dwellers and the old farmers possess a lot of knowledge to offer the city people.” In

‘Owners’ manually harvest the rice and prepare it for drying. Photo: Pia Kieninger



2000, the Ownership System started with 39 terraces, and membership expanded quickly to include 453 owners with 415 plots, or more than 1000 participants including their families and friends in 2006.

Six different programmes are offered. Two are for growing rice (for individuals with families and friends, or for groups sharing common paddy fields), one is for growing rice and brewing rice wine, one is for cultivating soybeans, and one for growing cotton, producing textiles and dyeing them with indigo. The sixth, a programme for reconstructing old houses was also recently introduced. Participation fees for the city dwellers range from the equivalent of around US\$30 to US\$300, depending on the type of programme and field size, with 10% of the fees going to the landowners and the rest to the association.

The owners' farming activities are strictly scheduled within seven collective working days during the year: rice planting in April/May, weeding in June, July and August, harvesting and threshing in September, and the harvest festival in October. Each day starts with an attendance check and a welcome speech to explain the procedures. Oyamasenmuida Preservation Association members and local volunteers act as instructors, while during the rest of the season, the association takes care of the other tasks. Besides these scheduled activities, exchange and communication among the owners, farmers and local people is equally important. Working days typically include shared lunches or dinners, dancing (the Oyamasenmuida dance), and karaoke parties. This helps to establish and deepen friendships between participants. Moreover, several side activities are offered such as courses

'Owners' receive instructions from farmers and association members before planting rice.

Photo: Pia Kieninger



Intergenerational exchange after the harvest.

Photo: Pia Kieninger

on preparing traditional dishes and handcrafts, nature education programmes, hiking tours, traditional dances, concerts and theatre, and even volleyball tournaments in the paddy fields before rice planting. The association also built the tanada club house financed by the Kamogawa City, to encourage more rural-urban exchange. "Many people meet farmers at the tanada club and become personal friends. I guess this is also an aim of the club," says one of the owners who developed a lasting friendship with the landowner of his rented paddy field and spends the nights before working days in the landowner's house.

Why participate? The motivations driving the participation of the local landowners and population include landscape conservation, revival of rural areas, exchange with the urban population, and attracting urban people back to the countryside in the long run. It remains to be seen whether many of Japan's urban majority will be motivated to move to the country and take up farming as a profession or help to rebuild rural communities. At the moment, urban participants who travel up to 150 km to reach the land, are mostly motivated by their love for the rice terraces which they wish to preserve. They also look for recreation, the joy of manual work in the open air, and to be close to nature. Most of them had no connection with farming before taking part, and they want to learn more about agriculture and Japanese culture. Many parents see the educational value of involving their children. "Tanada can only be cultivated by hand. It is important to protect the heritage of our ancestors and the cultural landscape. I bring my children and grandchildren to learn to work with their hands. It is very important that children see that manual labour is exhausting."

The relevance of the Ownership System for food production is marginal, as the terrace areas and the amount of rice harvested by individuals is quite small, and from a strictly economic point of view, rice in supermarkets is much cheaper. However, the 'non-economic' values gained during the production process and from the self-produced rice, rice wine, tofu and soybeans far outweigh the lower prices from supermar-

kets. Furthermore, since the Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011, the director of the association reported an increased interest in food safety and an even higher interest in participation by young people and families.

The rest of the world Although the Japanese experience is unique in terms of its socio-economic and demographic transformation processes, similarities can be found in initiatives around the world. For example, a similar system called ‘rent a grapevine’ started in 2002 in vineyards in Purbach and Retz, Austria. Volunteers learn to appreciate farming and the landscape, and are rewarded with their own wine. As in Japan, participants work for five or six days each year. The initiative was initiated by the tourism association to promote the municipality and support local farmers with additional income. Whereas the Japanese Tanada Ownership System helps to safeguard rice terraces threatened by abandonment, in Purbach, vineyards have been newly created for the purpose of the renting programme, and in Retz, farmers take turns in providing land. Similar to Japan, participants are mostly high educated city dwellers, but with a passion for wine.

Protecting landscapes and accompanying all the steps of food production seem to be important motivators for urban participants. The rural urban cooperation seen in Japan not only satisfies urban participants,



Cultural landscapes protected by the Tanada Ownership System. Photo Pia Kieninger

but can be highly beneficial for the conservation of cultural landscapes and biodiversity. And, last but not least, the work of local farmers is more highly valued, and they are better able to share their knowledge, experience and skills, and contribute more to the cultivation of their land.

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Celebrating with some traditional theatre during the annual harvest festival. Photo: Pia Kieninger

