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CONSERVATION OF THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE IN SHIRAKAWA-GO

Shirakawa-go

The “Historic Villages of Shirakawa-go and Gokayama” were inscribed as World Cultural Heritage sites in 1995. Shirakawa-go is located in the mountainous region in central Japan. Since the 1960s, the number of Gassho-style houses, which have large thatched roofs for sericulture, decreased sharply because of the construction of dams and depopulation. At that time, the residents of Ogimachi Village began conserving Gassho-style houses, unlike other villages where most Gassho-style houses have been rebuilt as modern houses or destroyed by fire. Ogimachi Village was defined as an Important Preservation District for Groups of Historic Buildings in 1976. At present, approximately 700 people reside in Ogimachi Village.

Cultural Landscape

The elements of the landscape in Shirakawa-go are buildings, cultivated land, roads, water systems and forests. The crucial element is Gassho-style houses, although the wholeness of and relationships among all the elements are also of utmost importance. The biggest change in land use in the last 100 years has been the decrease in cultivated land and increase in forest and housing sites. Previously, in forest areas, slash-burn agriculture was practiced and fields for thatch in the forest area; however, most of these fields have disappeared. Moreover, most roads were surfaced with asphalt in the 1970s.

Living Activities in Cultural Landscapes

In Shirakawa-go, the standard occupations of the residents have changed drastically, from sericulture and agriculture to construction and tourism. Their activities have now converged into tourism. Sericulture, which may be a factor in the origin of Gassho-style houses, ended in the 1970s. Since the construction business is suffering due to depression these days, some residents have opened restaurants, souvenir shops, and small museums. There are strict regulations in place for landscape alterations, but living activity changes by itself.

Organisation for conservation

The most vital point is that the organisation of residents, which was formed in 1971, mainly works toward conservation. They hold discussions on the advisability of modifications. A foundation named “protection of Gassho-style houses in World Heritage” is also an effective organisation in Shirakawa. Funds generated from parking fees charged from tourists and received from local governments are used for repair works. This foundation also restores abandoned rice fields and supports the use of traditional materials. These works are effective in conserving the landscape.

Activities of the next generation

In Shirakawa, elementary school students plant rice crops, and junior high school students assist in re-thatching the roofs of Gassho-style houses. Students can become aware of tradition and conservation works through such programs.

What is important for the conservation of cultural landscapes?

The first step in conserving cultural landscape involves identifying the traditional and significant elements of the landscape. The next step is identifying the elements that must be protected and the manner in which they will be protected. The tangible elements of the landscape are tied together with the intangible benefits of the residents' living activities, although these activities should be modified accordingly. Thus, it is important to consider not only the tangible elements, but also the intangible activities.