

PROTECTING, GROWING AND UTILIZING JAPAN'S FORESTS

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Japan's strong policy of afforestation and drive to conserve its forests while using them as a resource have given it the second-highest forest coverage rate among OECD member countries, and its forested land area has remained unchanged for fifty years.*

Director-general Kouji Makimoto of the Forestry Agency, Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries discusses the current state of Japan's forests and the country's future forest policies.

What makes Japanese forests different from those in other countries?

Japan's forests cover about 25.05 million hectares and account for about two-thirds of its land area. Our forest ratio ranks second among OECD member countries. Moreover, Japan's forests are highly diverse thanks to the geographic characteristics of the Japanese archipelago, which extends north and south and encompasses various altitudes. There are subarctic forests in eastern Hokkaido, subtropical forests such as the mangroves of the

southern islands, and deciduous broadleaf trees and evergreen trees in the cool temperate forest areas as well as the warm temperate forest areas.

Approximately sixty percent of these are natural forests, while forty percent were grown through reforestation on felled areas. Trees planted after the Second World War have matured, and the growing stock—the volume of tree trunks constituting the forest—has almost tripled over the past fifty years. The national tree-planting campaign that began in 1950 and spread nationwide is probably a good



Kouji Makimoto, director-general of the Forestry Agency, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries



measure of how vital forests are to the Japanese people.

In addition, I believe the presence of Their Majesties the Emperor and Empress at the annual National Arbor Day celebration as well as having Their Imperial Highnesses the Crown Prince and Crown Princess at the annual National Tree Care Festival have been very influential. Thanks to the efforts of our many predecessors, Japan currently boasts rich forest resources.

Even in the field of forestry mechanization and productivity, improvement have become indispensable, so we are revising the Forest Act and taking other actions to promote ways to better consolidate forest management.

What concrete measures are being taken to optimize the use of Japan's rich forest resources?

In 2010, Japan enacted the Act for Promotion of Use of Wood in Public Buildings, which established objectives including that, in principle, nationally owned low-rise buildings should be constructed of wood, and that other public buildings should use wood for their interiors. Thanks to this act, more local government facilities and schools are being built of wood. You can also find railway stations and commercial facilities that make use of wood.

This is largely thanks to the development of architectural technology, such as the pervasive use of a wooden material with excellent strength called cross-laminated timber. CLT is created from panels made of laminated wooden boards layered in such a way that the fiber direction of each board is at right angles to the one before. This has allowed for the construction of wooden medium-rise buildings.

In addition, the Forestry Agency is carrying out a campaign to showcase reasons to use wood and promotes the use of products and facilities made of wood in homes, workplaces and local communities.

Within this initiative, we are advancing educational initiatives for both children and adults to provide hands-on experiences with timber and wood products. The Agency hopes this will promote appreciation for using wood as a part of their lifestyle and culture. Many local governments and companies have participated in this motivating initiative.

How will Japan's forests be managed from now on?

We believe it is essential to harvest and use trees as well as take advantage of the multiple functions of forests. For example, forests also prevent sediment disasters, help mitigate floods and secure water sources by storing water, preserve the global environment by absorbing carbon dioxide, maintain biodiversity and contribute to people's health and cultural activities.

In particular, the Agency has come up with "Japan's Forests with Breathtaking Views: Selections from Tourist Destinations in National Forests" a way to use forests as a tourist resource. We are working on measures to help visitors experience the nature and culture of the place through activities such as forest walks.

To make good use of all that forests offer requires appropriate management, such as growing large trees by thinning and weeding, which preserves the soil. The agency plans to take different approaches to the forests according to the functions and roles of each in categories. The natural forests—including those that have been selected as natural World Heritage Sites—are carefully preserved. Some of the manmade forests will be converted into mixed forests of coniferous and broadleaf trees, to cultivate biodiversity and recharge water sources, while other parts are destined to become logging resources and reforestation sites to pass our precious forest resources on to the next generation. We are hoping to take full advantage of the charms of Japanese forests by actively using them in various forms, from tourism to industrial products, while of course also managing them carefully. 

* According to *Global Forest Resources Assessment 2015* (second edition, published by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization in 2016), Japan's forest coverage rate is 68.5 percent, second among OECD member countries after Finland. The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries presents the same rate as approximately 67 percent, since they use a different definition of national land area.