Use of Forests in the Villages of the Kitakami Mountains

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This research uses the mountain villages of the Kitakami Mountains to examine the use of forests during the feudal period and afterward by grouping forest uses into two types, those for commercial production and those for subsistence.

Beginning in the feudal period, commercial uses included sericulture, hunting, tatara (clay furnace) steel-making, and cattle breeding. From the Taisho through the early Showa periods, commercial uses included the production of railroad ties and coal, and after that, from the mid-1950s, they were used for the production of pulp and timber. Based on estimates of annual logging volumes, the amount of logging for the production of coal for tatara steel-making, which was said to have inflicted significant damage on the forests, was less by a factor of ten than the amount of logging for the production of coal, pulp and timber in the Showa period. In addition, relatively more ruins remaining from the tatara steel-making period were found near the Sanriku-kaigan coast. The same can be said of the scale of logging for fuel for salt-making, so no large-scale deforestation occurred in the middle of the Kitakami Mountains. Large-scale deforestation for the production of coal began with the clearing for motorways, which began in the mid-1930s, and as needs shifted more toward pulp and timber, continued to the mid-1980s, spurred by extensions to as well as new woodland roads. Logging has become the main industry in Akka. These abundant forests, which have withstood over 50 years of deforestation, grew during the Meiji and Taisho periods after tatara steel-making declined in the middle and lower reaches of the Akka River, and grew in the upper stretches of the Akka River since the feudal period.

Various plants in the forest are used for subsistence, and the type of deforestation that would bring about the depletion of resources has not been seen. Wild plants with the right quality and shape for tools are also used ingeniously. Moreover, forest resources are frequently used for religious rituals, and it is clear that forest resources are considered indispensable in the hearts of the people in the mountain villages.

The most significant use of forests that continues into the present day is for fuel. I believe that it is necessary to develop a regional system that will support the traditional use of
firewood in the mountain villages as a model for an environmentally friendly society, the importance of which has been touted in recent years.