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Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society
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Shiho Satsuka

Biodiversity in Satoyama Conservation: Aesthetics, Science, and the Politics of Knowledge

How do we know what kinds of biodiversity to conserve? What kind of knowledge gains legitimacy in biocultural diversity conservation? Current discussions of biocultural diversity focus on the significance of traditional knowledge cultivated in specific local environments. While the attention to traditional knowledge recognizes diverse knowledge systems, how can biocultural diversity projects move beyond reproducing the old dichotomy between “modern” scientific and “traditional” local knowledge? What are the politics of framing some knowledge as culturally specific “ethno” science and others as neutral, cosmopolitan science? How can we conceptualize biocultural diversity projects without reaffirming the asymmetrical power relations between science and traditional knowledge?

Anthropologists have pointed out that in the dominant biocultural diversity discourse culture is assumed to be static and bound to a specific geographic location (e.g., Brosius and Hitchner 2010, Cocks 2006). This perception of local culture contributes to maintaining the hierarchy between techno-science and traditional ecological knowledge, and, ironically, it tends to place a burden on non-Western people to be environmental stewards, even though the problem of declining diversity has been attributed to the pressure of industrialization from cosmopolitan centers.

Building on these critiques, we need to critically examine how people translate and appropriate the biocultural diversity perspective, and how they negotiate their positions by engaging in diversity conservation projects. It is important to explore the political process of cultural translation and to examine how biocultural diversity projects provide a point of articulation among variously situated actors. By tracing the translation process, we can see how the culturally specific discourse of biocultural diversity has gained authority with its assumed claim of universal applicability, and how the discourse has drawn a wide range of people in to participate, even though there are tensions and incompatibility with their own perceptions of nature. Doing so allows us to focus on the dynamic interactions among knowledge systems and helps us to develop analyses that go beyond romanticizing local knowledge as a remedy for the problems of modernization.

My current project on satoyama “village forest” restoration movements in Japan urges me to think about different strategies that the Japanese government, ecological scientists, and citizens employ in their attempt to translate the concepts and practices of biocultural diversity conservation.

Satoyama refers to secondary woodlands and grasslands near human settlements in Japanese rural areas, where people have coppiced and collected wood and grass for fuel, fertilizer, and fodder for centuries. Since the 1960s, due to industrialization, satoyama has been neglected and has deteriorated. Concerned by this situation, ecological scientists have expanded the original meaning of satoyama and developed the concept of “satoyama landscape,” an ecosystem consisting of a diverse mosaic of agricultural and nonagricultural lands, including farm fields, rice paddies, irrigation canals, ponds, and human settlements, as well as woodlands (Kadoya and Washitani 2010, Takeuchi 2010). By using this term, scientists argue that a long history of heterogeneous human land use has fostered a variety of habitats for wildlife and plants, creating greater biodiversity (e.g., Fukamachi, Oku, and Nakashizuka 2001, Kobori and Primack 2003).

Meanwhile, the Japanese government launched the “Satoyama Initiative” at the UNESCO Global Workshop in 2010. The unique characteristic of the Satoyama Initiative is its emphasis on the importance of “integrating traditional ecological knowledge and modern science,” enhancing the “harmony” between humans and nature. The advocates of this initiative promote satoyama as “a new model for a sustainable society” (Satoyama Initiative 2010).

By integrating traditional Japanese agrarian knowledge and modern science, the Satoyama Initiative can offer a possible challenge to the hierarchical international division of labor between traditional ecological knowledge and science. Yet, in the very process of this shift, another important tension emerges. How can satoyama, as a culturally specific set of practices and landscapes, be a model for a diversity of anthropogenic landscapes that vary dramatically in each location?

The government-led Satoyama Initiative can be analyzed as part of the long-standing Japanese struggle to bridge the gap between the universal claims of Western scientific knowledge and its incommensurability in non-Western contexts. It is also an effort on

the part of the Japanese to be recognized in the international community as a member with the same stature as its Western counterparts, rather than as a peripheral non-Western other. Yet, in the process, the government-led initiative—like dominant biodiversity projects—privileges a culturally specific perception of nature as if it can serve as a model for other knowledge traditions.

In contrast, the participants in grassroots satoyama conservation movements are more aware that satoyama may not be applicable as a model outside of Japan. Yet some satoyama conservation groups do foster translocal and transnational connections.

In particular, the grassroots citizens' satoyama conservation movement that I have been working with offers a different example of knowledge translation and transnational network making. The group's activities center on the revitalization of forests that produce highly valued wild matsutake mushrooms in the suburb of Kyoto. While the group is led by a prominent scientist, the uncontrollability of the wild mushroom encourages the group to merge their scientific knowledge with animistic perceptions: matsutake is a blessing from the mountain deities, and reminds group members of the humble position of humans in the web of complex interspecies relations.

Unlike the government-sponsored Satoyama Initiative, the grassroots group does not attempt to present their knowledge and activities as a “model” that is applicable to other locations. While they share their knowledge with people in other locations, including China and Sweden, they insist on local specificity and difference. They offer their experience as an “example” for comparison, so that people elsewhere can reflect on their uniquely specific cultural traditions and environmental features.

These examples offer us materials to explore how biocultural diversity projects, as an imagined common language, work to standardize knowledge, yet simultaneously provide a tool for people to make sense of and to negotiate their positions.

Considering satoyama projects allows us to rethink histories and cultural frameworks of scientific assessments of biological diversity not only in Japan, but everywhere. It also requires us to think seriously about the political struggles for legitimacy among different knowledge systems.

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