

## **Satoyama – a new initiative**

**Delegate's report on the UN Conference on Biodiversity held in  
Nagoya, Japan, from 17 to 22 October 2010**

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### **What is *Satoyama*?**

At the Biodiversity Conference in Nagoya, the Japanese Government launched a new initiative, known as *Satoyama*, for the protection of biodiversity on cultivated land. In a large-scale ceremony, 51 partner organisations were introduced. From Europe, Birdlife International and the *Deutscher Verband für Landschaftspflege* (German Association for Landcare) are involved in the initiative.



*Founding of the International Partnership for the Satoyama Initiative.  
A total of 51 organisations from all continents signed up to the Japanese Satoyama Initiative.*

The word ***satoyama*** was originally used to describe a geographical area. To understand what it means, we need to look at the Japanese landscape. Japan is formed by the ridge of a chain of volcanoes. Because of their hard rock, the mountains have steep

slopes and are spaced out one behind the other in a succession of chains. Dense forest covers their peaks. **Fertile land** for crop cultivation is to be found **at the foot of the mountains** where they give way to the coastal plains. Thousands of rice paddies and vegetable fields are squeezed into a limited area there. These smallholding regions used to be known as *satoyama*, a word derived from **sato**, meaning 'fertile land', and **yama**, which means 'mountain'. I happened to come across the same use of the term in modern-day language at the breakfast buffet in our hotel, where the chef offered us particular dishes which, he said, came from the *satoyama*.



*A Japanese breakfast with raw vegetables, noodles, prawns, sushi and rice.*

As a political term, *satoyama* refers to the **use of land in harmony with nature** – what the Western world calls 'sustainable land use'. The Japanese place far greater emphasis than Europeans on food produced by traditional methods. For this reason the concept of *satoyama*, besides its environmental implications, also has strong cultural overtones. The initiative is deliberately focused on **farmed land**, on the areas we refer to as cultivated landscapes. This is where the aims of the European landscape-conservation bodies merge with those of the *Satoyama* Initiative. The concept also embodies the idea of **enhancing the value of land** for nature, for human nutrition, as a source of income and as part of the cultural heritage. It is no wonder that such a concept is arousing interest in many developing countries too. In a speech on the common features of landcare in Europe and *Satoyama*, I did not find it difficult to appeal to a widespread pioneering spirit.

*The speech in German, entitled Satoyama und Landcare, can be found at [www.goepfel.de](http://www.goepfel.de) by selecting the Reden option.*

A representative of the native population of a Philippine island told us how much the hopes and pride of the island's inhabitants had been revived following the creation of a landcare group. They were now aware, he said, that their traditional way of life was something of value that was worth preserving. Africans from Zimbabwe, Kenya, Tanzania and Ghana also signed up to the initiative.

A film from Uganda showed how an extended family enhanced their land by planting trees. The combination of farming and forestry brought more stable income and saved water. A subsequent contribution from the US delegation, however, highlighted the extent to which opinions differ. Arable land, they said, was there to generate 'most income'. Who would voluntarily sacrifice land for landscape conservation? Nature, in their view, could be left to develop on worthless land.

The aim of the *Satoyama* Initiative is to develop a globally applicable strategy for the sustainable use of the sources of life on our planet. Is no less than an attempt to anchor the diversity of the earth with its wealth of regional land-use traditions on a permanent basis to counterbalance the trend towards uniformity that marks our globalised civilisation.



*Yotsuya Senmaida, the 1,000 paddies of Yotsuya at the foot of Mount Kurakako. Rice cultivation in this area is no longer economical at current world market prices, but 22 rice farmers grow high-quality rice here with the aid of government subsidies.*

To see an example of a **typical Satoyama project**, I visited Yotsuya Senmaida, the ‘thousand paddy fields’ of Yotsuya in the vicinity of the town of Shinshiro, to the east of Nagoya. Surrounded by steep wooded mountains, the site contains 400 **terraced rice paddies** with an average surface area of 900 square metres. They are cultivated by 22 local farmers. The German delegation was given a conducted tour by 70-year-old Shunji Koyama. We climbed up from terrace to terrace, which gave us some idea of the laborious nature of his work. It had been essential to fence the paddy fields to keep out wild boar and monkeys. Mr Koyama chairs the farmers’ association dedicated to the preservation of the terraced paddies. Speaking of this responsibility brings a veritable gleam to his eye. He regards this as the source of his being and a whole way of life. It is also impressive to see how traditional seasonal practices are nurtured and how schoolchildren from the area around Yotsuya Senmaida are involved in the project. The climax of the year is a torchlight procession through the valley at night to give thanks for the harvest. It is not possible to survive entirely without public support in Japan either. The rice-growers receive an annual grant of about €200 per hectare. Half of this sum is paid by the Japanese Government, a quarter comes from the prefecture of Aichi and the rest from the town of Shinshiro. There are additional payments for the maintenance of watercourses.



*70-year-old rice-grower Shunji Koyama explains to his German guest the satoyama principle of land use in harmony with nature. The hillside forest in the background comprises arborvitae trees and Japanese cedars.*

In the afternoon, we visited the Shinshiro **farmers' supermarket** to see how the marketing of smallholders' produce can be organised. The cooperative has 1,500 members. All of the affiliated farmers can supply the store. They receive 84% of the purchase price, and the cooperative retains 16% for the upkeep of the supermarket building. The label on each packaged product shows the name and address of the farmer who produced it. That helps to create consumer confidence. What was particularly noticeable was the large plant department in the store. The manager told us that even people who live in the most cramped conditions want to have some flowers and greenery around them. They regard these things as living beings.



*Local farmers can sell their produce direct to the Shinshiro farmers' supermarket. The producer is identified on the product labels. The farmer receives 84% of the purchase price, while the supermarket cooperative retains 16% to cover its running costs.*

Strangely moved, I returned to the noisy and almost treeless city of Nagoya. The interpreter said that he lived a healthier life here with his family than in Tokyo, because here at least he could travel out into the countryside and return on the same day. Will it be possible to ensure that the half of mankind who live in the world's megacities remain aware of the richness of their natural resources?

## The conference

First impressions were favourable. The Conference on Biodiversity seemed to be more subject-focused than the climate conferences. It was inspiring to see a gathering of thousands of like-minded people. Nevertheless, there were unmistakable diverging interests. Countries with a wealth of natural resources want **a share of the economic benefits** from the commercialisation of genetic resources. That applies to the use of these resources in medicinal products and cosmetics as well as in fruit drinks and fermented foodstuffs. The leading Japanese newspaper wrote at the halfway stage of the conference that “Many people live under the illusion that biodiversity has no bearing on the global economy”. At the same time, Yuje Watanabe, spokesman for the pharmaceuticals industry in Japan, warned against ‘overhasty compromises’. If the developed countries received their desired share of profits from the commercialisation of genetic resources, he said, “it would become impossible to do business”. The impression I had from the debates was that the countries of the South will not give way on this point. They see this as the only way of achieving a fairer global economy, given the fact that payments from CO<sub>2</sub> emissions trading have yet to materialise.

Progress has also been faltering on **payments** for international projects for the preservation of biodiversity. **Norway** has been providing €350 million a year since 2007. That little country is contributing an additional amount of €700 million in 2010. **Germany** has pledged an aggregate amount of €500 million to cover the three years from 2010 to 2012 and an annual amount of €500 million from 2013. It was clearly perceptible at the conference that speakers from these two countries received a considerably more sympathetic hearing from the developing countries than contributors from the other industrialised nations.

Delegates from the overwhelming majority of countries were in favour of **vegetable-oil fuels**. The Brazilians were the leading advocates of these fuels, stating categorically that energy crops could be cultivated in future without any need for forest clearance. The delegate from Ghana, Alfred Oteng-Yeboah, on the other hand, made the point that farmers who switched to export crops often became poorer as a result.

For all the difficulties and differences over substantive issues at such a large conference with participants from 170 countries, the **working atmosphere** was impressive. Delegates made specific proposals for the wording of the UN Secretariat’s conference document. They even agonised over individual words. National parliaments, including the Bundestag, could learn some lessons from them. When I compared the various debating cultures, it struck me that hierarchical structures become less significant as the geographical catchment area of such forums widens. At this conference no one ruled the roost. The same phenomenon is

observable to a lesser degree in the European context. Rites of allegiance need confined territories like those of nations or their constituent states.

At UN conferences, countries are grouped by continent.

At the Biodiversity Conference, four other groups formed, transcending these intercontinental divisions. There were the developing countries, comprising 131 states including China, the European Union, the small island nations and the 17 countries with extensive biodiversity. The United States did not sign the Biodiversity Convention in 1992 and has remained a non-party ever since. Its delegates took part as observers.

Interpreting facilities were available at plenary sessions only and were confined to the official languages of the UN, namely English, French, Spanish, Arabic, Russian and Chinese. At all the other gatherings, the Europeans spoke English without interpretation.



*A scene from one of the EU coordination meetings that were held every morning. This picture shows the Austrian, Estonian, British and Cypriot delegates. The prevailing atmosphere was one of focused commitment. Everyone spoke English. There were no interpreters.*

Attending the morning discussions of the EU delegations felt rather like coming home. Suddenly, I started to regard people from France or Spain as part of the family. There was a sense that we were a distinct unit. Given that we account for 6% of the global population, surely that is only right and proper. I rather regretted that there were no institutionalised contacts between the EU and the neighbouring continent of Africa. Such links depended on the personal initiative of individual delegates.



*The Congolese delegation conferring during a break between sessions. The subject of discussion was fair benefit-sharing from the commercialisation of industrial products.*

### **The country and its people**



*The first sight of Japan comes as a surprise. As we arrived from the West in the early morning, the landscape that greeted us was an expanse of tree-covered mountains and deep gorges.*



*The coastal plain in the east of the main island, Honshu, is highly developed. All of the largest cities are located there. Yet even within the towns and cities there are rice paddies. Every little piece of land is put to use.*

The first view of Japan from the air comes as a surprise. Wooded mountains rise almost straight out of the sea. Settlements are confined to a narrow coastal strip. Clouds of morning mist lay in the valleys. I saw reservoirs, power lines crossing mountains and roads through narrow valleys. I later learned that the large cities are situated on the east coast, facing the Pacific, for climatic reasons. During our arrival I sensed what a great achievement it was to build a functioning civilisation for 127 million people in such a confined space. Everything seems streamlined, compact and functional. In the train from the airport to the centre of Nagoya, I had to sit on the seat indicated on my ticket. The seat-reservation card was prominently affixed to the backrest of the seat in front. .



*Mouth mask in the underground. Many Japanese wear one when they have a cold so as not to infect anyone else.*

The railway stations are spotless, with not a cigarette end to be seen between the tracks. Everything seems highly disciplined. The Japanese, after all, even have a word – *karoshi* – for death by overworking. On the other hand, I learned from the interpreter that there are also workplace parties where drink flows freely. On the following morning, however, no one mentions what happened at the party. There is an art of forgetting and an art of ignoring. Any remark that flouts conventions is not heard and certainly elicits no response.



*The busy Meitetsu Station in Nagoya. Everything works. Everything is clean.*



*Nagoya city centre – densely developed and no green spaces.*

Japan's island location has given rise to a great emphasis on the community. Europeans intent on their freedom are often astonished by the way in which people subjugate their own personality in Japan. I am sure I heard the staccato tones of 'Hai hai' ('Yes, yes'), accompanied by a slight bow, a thousand times in a week, but I never heard the word for 'no' (*ie*) at all. Japanese people always make a friendly impression. We should not be fooled by their smiles, however. If anyone does not do what they want, they will not give in.



*Nagoya Castle at sunset. What can we Europeans learn from the Japanese?  
How to nurture traditions yet be open to everything new.*



*Children are introduced to nature at Toyota no Mori,  
a centre for environmental education on the outskirts of Nagoya.*

An entirely different picture of Japanese thinking was revealed to me in the **grove of the Shinto Atsuta Shrine** on the south side of Nagoya. Every Japanese is born into the Shinto religion. In Shinto belief, nature is also the offspring of the gods and is therefore endowed with life and a soul. For this reason the ancient trees in the vicinity of the shrine are carefully nurtured. A dedicated tree minder is employed for that purpose. *Shintō* means 'way of the gods'. At the core of the Shinto faith is the veneration of nature and ancestors. When a Japanese person dies, he or she joins a long line of ancestors who form a link between the living and the gods. I saw young Japanese men wearing Western suits stand quietly praying before the oldest camphor tree in the grove. The presence of ancestors can be sensed in the flow of its trunk and branches. I saw a young couple who had brought their child to the Shinto shrine in accordance with an old tradition, a practice that is similar to Christian baptism.



*The Shinto Atsuta Shrine in Nagoya. Even many modern Japanese people pray there to the gods and to their own ancestors.*



*A young couple bring their child to the Atsuta Shrine. This special day has a similar significance to that of a Christian baptism.*

In Shintoism, the eternal cycle of life is divided into constantly recurring twelve-year cycles. For this reason, there is a special affinity between people aged 36, 48 and 60, for example. This affinity is symbolised by a common animal that represents the year. The year 2010 is the year of the tiger, which is the common birth symbol of everyone who reaches an age divisible by 12 in 2010.

On leaving, the temple forester Menozu Nakano congratulated me on reaching my 60<sup>th</sup> birthday. This, he said, marked the start of a new 12-year cycle with new vitality. Well, well, it was worth travelling to Japan if only to hear that!

**The most vivid impression on the return flight was made by the sight of  
Siberia's vast expanses under gleaming white snow.**

