Ownership and Access: Tenure in the Forests of Mt. Fuji

Question: Who owns the property rights to the forests that I visited around Mt. Fuji and who has access to them? What differences exist between property rights and use rights and how do these differences influence land management?

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Background

Forest tenure around the base of Mt. Fuji is a spectrum that ranges from common land to strict private ownership. Land ownership around Mt. Fuji is qualified by use-rights that have existed for centuries. Generally, forest owners fall into one of the following categories.

1. Iriai: traditional common land rights
2. Private owners: companies/individuals

Underlying policy formation or changes in how an owner manages their land are important questions of who owns a piece of land, who claims to own this piece of land, and who has access to this piece of land (White 2002). The exercise of traditional use-rights on public and private land creates interesting tenure arrangements.

Methodology

I used 12 forests surrounding Mt. Fuji as a representative sample of the forests in Japan. Within these forests I catalogued ownership, land-use, tree cover, entrance fees, and a basic description of the historical use in the area. I geotagged photos of each forest and created a map (figure 1). Using google earth I layered geo-referenced point data with the survey data described above, historical aerial photo overlays, and polygon boundaries of the legal government and common ownership. My understanding of the property rights and use-rights in the area would not be possible without the help of local ecologist, Watanabe Michihito.

Results

Various methods of forest management and timber production have come in and out of use in the course of Japan’s rich forest history. Some traditional methods are still used simultaneously with larger industrial scale timber production, while others are no longer employed.

- Patterns of historical use, like coppicing for firewood and harvesting grasses for animal feed, still occur on much of the land outside the recorded legal boundary.
- Traditional, village-based use-rights have a political voice and representation: The Onshirin Kumiai.

Large-scale, plantation-style production occurs on both public and private land in the Mt. Fuji area. Some of the sample sites were used for timber production after WWII or earlier in the century.

- Private forest land on the southern side of Mt. Fuji has been fragmented into very small parcels. This is due to land sale, and land being divided up in estates of deceased owners.
- Small parcel size decreases profit margins. The high management costs associated with thinning and managing plantation forests leads to neglect, and many forests lay economically dormant until the market price of timber increases or management costs on their land decrease.

Discussion

Being considerate of the national and local interests surrounding forest land continues to be a challenge on forestlands worldwide. In trying to create a more collaborative approach to policy formation, an intuitive, inclusive method of information transfer is essential.

Forest tenure is a broad concept that includes ownership, tenancy and other arrangements for the use of forests. It is a combination of legally or customarily defined forest ownership and of rights and arrangements to manage and use forest resources. Forest tenure determines who can use what resources, for how long and under what conditions.
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- Patterns of historical use, like coppicing for firewood and harvesting grasses for animal feed, still occur on much of the land outside the recorded legal boundary.
  - Historical, village-based, use-rights have a political voice and representation: The Onshirin Kumiai.
- Large-scale, plantation-style production occurs on both public and private land in the Mt. Fuji area. Some of the sample sites were used for timber production after WWII or earlier in the century.
  - Private forest land on the southern side of Mt. Fuji has been fragmented into very small parcels. This is due to land sale, and land being divided up in estates of deceased owners. Small parcel size decreases profit margins.
  - The high management costs associated with thinning and managing plantation forests leads to neglect, and many forests lay economically dormant until the market price of timber increases or management costs on their land decrease.