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Forest as a Communal Resource

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In industrialized countries, government intervention in forest management and privatization of forest has been going on. However, both attempts have been faced with difficult problems, and now, we have to seek another way of forest management. Communal use of forestland is a good example of one possible way. The subject of this paper is historical analysis of forest management in Japanese communal land.

In the middle of the Meiji Era (1868-1912), a movement for conservation of communal forest resources was started in Japan. In this paper, I would like to present an example of communal forest management system in Shiga prefecture. During the feudal era (1603-1867), forests in Japan was protected by restrictive policy of feudal lords. But, before and after Meiji Restoration (1868), everything was confused in Japan.

In this period, deforestation has been going on for two reasons. First, the restrictive policy of feudal lords was abolished, but new institutions for forest management had not been established. Secondly, the price of wood was rising after Meiji Restoration. The deforestation led to flooding and drought.

In the middle of Meiji Era (1868-1912), a movement for conservation of communal forest resources was started in Shiga prefecture. This movement was led by alliances of villages which shared the right to access forest. Each alliance was formed by about 10 villages located in a small valley and shared the use of same water resources. (fig.1) The purpose of this alliance was mainly equitable

distribution of water supplies. The foundation of this alliance can be traced way back to before the 16th century. This alliance held a particular forestland for collection of fuelwood and green manure.

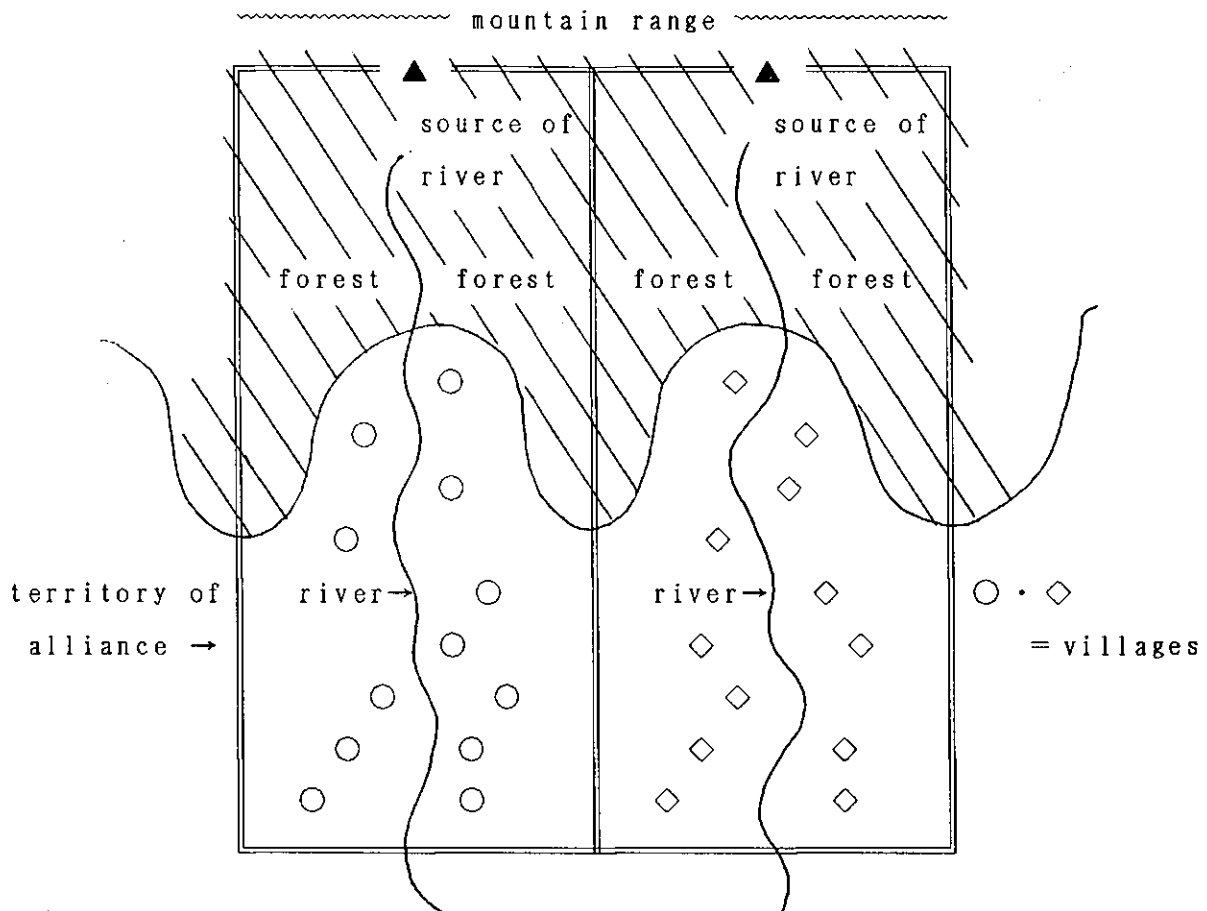


fig.1 Scheme of territory held by alliances
which were formed in small valleys

In this forestland, deforestation has been going on as mentioned earlier. Under the confusing circumstances, most of the users became selfish and tried to maximize short-term gains. It should be noted here that most of the users were belonged to the lower classes. On the other hand, the conservation movement had been led by people who belonged to the upper classes. They were large-scale land owners who owned many paddies for rent.

Widespread destruction of the forest cover led to deterioration of water resources. And this affected the productivity of paddies. For this reason, the people who belong to upper classes led the movement for conservation of forests. In addition to this reason, I wish to point out the fact that they were educated and could think about natural resource management in community-based long-term perspective.

With increasing demand for conservation, a meeting of village chiefs was held and passed the restrictive law. This law was passed with the aim of enforcing sustainable use of existing forest resources, and contained the decision to plant trees in deforested land. The chiefs appointed some agents for the management of their forest. These agents were elected from among the members of the village assembly, and took the responsibility for managing forest. During the latter term of Meiji Era, the prefectural government supported this kind of activities.

At the beginning of this movement, the lower classes who made their living by selling fuelwood and were using green manure made an objection against the restrictive rules. But, after the 1900's, Japanese society had been industrialized and people who belonged to the lower classes could get some jobs for a living wage. Also, in this period, the purchase of fertilizer became widespread. Mainly for these two reasons, the pressure of overuse of forestlands by the lower classes gradually reduced.

As a result of the forest conservation movement, and solution to the conflict on forest use between social classes, the forest cover of communal land began to recover. In this case, community-based institutions dealt with the conflicts and problems associated with their forestland. They solved the problems by creating and enforcing rules on the use and management of their forestland.

The villages that belong to the alliance included villages that had no forestland in its territory. Such villages with no forestlands had influences on the management of forestlands located far from them. In industrialized countries, this type of integration of communities is rare.

In Japan, large parts of forestland that we can access easily are managed for the purpose of wood production. Local people who are living near the forestland have lost direct relationship with forest. The forest industry of industrialized countries has had serious and long-term difficulties. On the other hand, the value of forest as a basic ingredient of local environment has been highly appreciated.

Forest decline is a problem that has influence over wide area. However, most of the influences are limited to the local area. I think it is important to create a system that can manage appropriate scale of forest area as a whole unit in community-based long-term perspective. The Japanese traditional system presented here is instructive in showing how forest management system can be designed.

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