Managing Goryōrin: Plans and Performance

The Yamanashi experience was the only large-scale disaster in Goryōrin history. Elsewhere, woodland arrangements gradually worked out. Property Office personnel devised and implemented management plans, and while actual practice varied considerably from region to region, the forest as a whole did in fact develop into a reasonably-well-managed and profitable fiscal foundation for the Imperial Household.

AN OVERVIEW

“Management” of the imperial estate can be broadly or narrowly defined. In a broad sense it included the shift from a multi-asset to a more purely forest-based domain, the methods employed in dealing with competing interest groups, and the procedures used to dispose of unwanted parcels. Here, however, we use the term more narrowly to mean the handling of those parcels that were envisaged and treated as permanent possessions, whether or not formally designated seden goryō.

In this narrower sense, management pertained much less to the human-relations issues that were central to our earlier chapters than to issues involving the rest of the Goryōrin ecosystem, its woody-stemmed vegetation in particular. As the problems of human resistance and human entanglement gradually eased, the managers of Goryōrin focused more fully on their woodland biota, and our attention shifts accordingly.

The first step in managing Goryōrin was the development of general plans that defined the scope and content of policy for the foreseeable future. These general plans established guidelines for detailed surveying, mapping, and stand evaluation on all Household woodland. They also guided the preparation of local operating plans, which were to guide actual afforestation, aftercare, harvesting, and disposal of the yield at specific sites, as well as any construction projects undertaken to expedite those tasks. This Goryōrin management took clear shape from about
1897 onward, by which time the basic surveying and boundary marking were well underway.

Even where those preliminary tasks were completed, however, the managing of Goryōrin remained a difficult task for reasons of geography and history. They produced particularly clear dissimilarities in the management of Goryōrin in Hokkaido and Naichi.

Regional Differences: Hokkaido and Naichi

Imperial Forest in Hokkaido was mainly located in a half-dozen large parcels in the island’s west-central section (see Map 7). It encompassed grand vistas of scarcely-worked woodland rich with old-growth stands of mixed conifers and broadleafs. Although mostly situated in mountainous terrain, it did not include the island’s highest regions, and much consisted of low hills that opened rather gently onto riverine and coastal lowlands.

From the outset, Hokkaido Goryōrin was logged in an ad hoc “gradualist” (zenbatsu) manner, with logging contractors taking the most merchantable and most accessible trees from contracted parcels, advancing parcel by parcel ever deeper into virgin stands. In essence the method was classic exploitation forestry.

Almost from the start, however, Goryōrin managers made efforts to improve silvicultural practice on the island. They called on loggers to remove defective trees as well as good ones, to thin dense stands, care for young growth, leave desirable seed trees, and regulate the cut with goals of stand improvement and sustainable harvest at least partially in mind. Their efforts fared poorly, however, in part because the small staff at the Sapporo regional headquarters was ill-equipped to oversee its great acreage of virgin timber. More basically, the problems stemmed from difficulty of transport and scarcity of labor, which led lumbermen to log only if they could minimize their costs as far as possible.

Naichi Goryōrin, by contrast, was a maze of relatively small parcels. Most were situated on steeply sloping mountainsides that faced narrow valleys cut by small, rushing streams. The parcels were of maddeningly convoluted shape, their boundaries determined basically by the tortuous configurations of long-standing agricultural land usage, which reflected local topography. Even in the Kiso Valley, pride and joy of the system, Goryōrin was situated, as Map 5 suggests, in the upper reaches of watersheds and among peaks and ridgelines, while the flatter lands and lower hillsides along rivers were left in the hands of villagers. And despite attempts to consolidate or dispose of small parcels, many remained as scattered islets of Goryōrin in a sea of other holdings.

Furthermore, so much Naichi Goryōrin had been subjected to centuries of use that long before 1890 it already ranged from nearly denuded brushland through areas of mediocre mixed forest to densely spaced plantation stands of sugi and hinoki. With so many sites severely ill-wooded or already in even-aged monoculture stands, the Property Office from early on promoted – and to considerable extent practiced – clearcutting and replacement planting, a pattern quite unlike that in Hokkaido.