

In the Mountains

Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley

We have our bear stew as the mountain shadows melt together into night. Mr. Suzuki tells me how it once was here in the forests of Akita, one of Japan's northern prefectures. His words draw in my mind a picture of this place before the war, before the tourists started coming as Japan's economy grew, before the great beech forests were cut, when these mountains were still almost wild.

The young girls serving us ignore our talk of bear and deer and serow, of hard white winters and lush green summers. Their thoughts are tied to the faint, tinny pop music that leaks from a cheap radio speaker in the kitchen. We in turn ignore the music as our talk lasts deep into the night. Our talk is of hunts, and bears taken and bears almost taken. Mr. Suzuki is a *matagi*, a bear hunter. As long as can be remembered even in legend, the people here have hunted the bear for food and as a source of medicine. A bear's gall bladder is still respected for its power to heal.

I learn that the bears now are smaller and leaner. The primeval forests that with their towering beeches and rich undergrowth sheltered the bears of old are now being cut away. There are replaced with dense stands of *sugi*, Japanese cedar, planted so close together that no sunlight touches the ground beneath them. There is no understory to provide food for wild animals. This of course is not unique to Japan: stretches of Scotland share the same curse, for example. The motivation is the same: short-term profit. Modern ecological science is showing us that it is vital to consider the longer term as the more important one.

We rise early the next morning and drive along a bumpy logging road until it ends at the foot of some tall beeches. This is the first untouched forest I have ever seen in Japan. The beeches and wild cherry trees and wild cedars cover the mountainsides with a delicately shaded green mosaic.

Mr. Suzuki tells me that not many people go into the forest. Those few who do are either bear hunters like himself or gatherers of *sansai*, wild vegetables

and herbs. Below us a slope drops away to a stream called the Okumazawa, the Great Bear Spring. It was once a fitting name. I wonder if it still is. For centuries, perhaps millenia, Mr. Suzuki's ancestors hunted the bear in these fastnesses. There was a balance. The bears flourished on their mountainsides, and the people flourished in their valley villages. Now the trees are torn off the slopes and the bears grow fewer and fewer. Only in difficult, rugged areas are tracts like the one before us preserved.

Mr. Suzuki talks of hunting with the spear and the matchlock rifle, weapons that are now only seen in museums. Modern hunters use shotguns and dress in Gore-Tex. Mr. Suzuki is one of the last few to know the old ways; he is one of the last true *matagi*.

On the ride back to town, thoughts of forests the world over tumble through my mind. The rain forests of Southeast Asia and South America face cutting on a scale undreamed of only a generation ago. We need to consider the long-term effect more carefully and realize that the problem is not confined to a single country or region, and that the buyers and sellers of the timber and the denuded land are equally responsible for the consequences. Failure to do so could leave these rain forests only as memories like the Cedars of Lebanon, but with a catastrophic effect on this planet.

Mr. Suzuki is pleased when I ask him to don the traditional *matagi* costume for a photograph. When he emerges from his home some minutes later, he looks as though he has stepped out of a time machine. The afternoon sun streams down between two mountains and gilds his face. His eyes are shining. He holds his *kumayari*—a bear spear—as a warrior of old would have held his lance. His heart is in the forest, beneath the beeches and with the bears.

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