



Rotten Woods

BY HIDEKO TAKAYAMA

- 1 JAPAN IS OUT OF WHACK. A 61-year-old man in Nagano goes to walk his dog, and a bear comes out of the woods and kills him. In Toyama, astronomers are forced to close an observatory to visitors until the local bears go into hibernation. A farmer near the city of Sendai walks out to his fields and finds his cabbage and radish plants gone — eaten by wild monkeys. Deer nibble away an entire forest on the outskirts of Tokyo. What are the animals trying to say?
- 2 Takeshi Maeda thinks he knows. "Our mountains are rotting," says the land-use expert and member of Japan's Upper House. In recent decades, Japan's timber companies and developers have wreaked havoc on Japan's forests, and they've done it without a saw or a bulldozer. The forests, once carefully cultivated for precious timber, have been neglected for decades because Japan imports most of the wood it needs. Now the forests are reverting back to a state of nature, and the results are a disaster. The trees are crowding out berry bushes that animals feed on.
- 3 As the rest of the world struggles with overdevelopment, how did Japan come to have the opposite problem? For centuries, the Japanese lived in harmony with their forests. Some mountain forests were left undisturbed to support old-growth broad-leaved and coniferous trees, while others were cultivated with a mix of oak, chestnut and other trees. The mature growth was carefully selected and felled, according to *ki no bunka*, or wood-based culture, in which some wood was used for charcoal and other timber for tasteful wooden houses built by master carpenters. During the military buildup of World War II, a sharp increase in demand for wood led to massive felling, which continued long after the war to

feed the housing-construction boom. Landowners, in a rush to replace the forests, planted almost exclusively fast-growing cedars as close together as they could. (Now 40 per cent of Japan's forests consist of cedars and cypresses planted in the 1950s.) Before the trees could mature, the construction industry, with the encouragement of the government, began importing timber from the United States and Canada.

- 4 Because Japan's small landowners couldn't compete with the big, efficient foreign-timber firms, most left the cedar and cypress forests alone. Japan's Forestry Agency estimates that 80 percent of such artificial woodlands need thinning and care. Forester Nobuyoshi Matsuki remembers being urged to plant hundreds of cedar saplings in a small lot. "Most of them were supposed to be thinned out after two decades," he says, "but they were left there, so weak and skinny."
- 5 What Japan's forests need, according to the experts, is a comeback in Japan's logging industry. "The trouble is that the man-made forests, says Mikito Sakata, spokesman for Japan's Forestry Agency, need human hands to become healthy again." Now an environmental movement is promoting Japanese wood, even though it usually costs more than imports. Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi suggested in a recent parliamentary session that Japanese timber be substituted for concrete in highway guardrails. The Forestry Agency has recently begun promoting the use of homegrown timber from 34 forests for schools and other public facilities, instead of imported wood.
- 6 This new twist on conservation is going to require re-educating Japan's public. Experts are now telling people that using disposable chopsticks isn't harmful to the environment, as long as the wood comes from thinned-out timber. C.W. Nicol, the 64-year-old author, adventurer and naturalist from Wales who's now a household name in Japan, has been using proceeds from his books, TV appearances and lectures to buy up land and cultivate the woods. Japan will need plenty more enthusiasts like him if it's going to rescue its dark, gloomy forests.

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