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ISE Grand Shrines

1.1 Background

Among many Shinto shrines, Ise Jingu, the Grand Shrine of Ise is the most revered shrine in Japan. The two Ise shrines make up the most important Shinto complex in Japan. In form, both are extremely similar but the Inner Shrine marks the primary base of the supreme deity *Amaterasu-omikami*, the Sun Goddess, worshipped here for 2,000 years as the predecessor of the Imperial Household and the supreme deity of Shinto.

The Outer Shrine is dedicated to *Toyouke-Omikami*, the provider of sacred foods to *Amaterasu-Omikami*, and other deities, and is where food offerings are made to *Amaterasu-Omikami*. In Ise Jingu, more than 1,500 ceremonies and rituals are held annually.



Entrance to the Ise
Grand Shrine complex

TWO KINDS OF FOREST

The Ise Grand Shrines are unique because, in addition to some 5,500 hectares of sacred forest, they are also surrounded by a vast area of forest covering the nearby mountains. These were created to meet the needs of the shrines for timber, plus a large farm to provide food to feed staff and provide offerings to the *kami*.

Together, they comprise a total ecosystem, linking the forests with the river-system, all the way to the sea. It, therefore, represents the most explicit and advanced example of the Shinto approach to Nature in general, and forest management in particular.



Climbing to Outer Shrine, inside the Ise Grand Shrine complex.

1.3 Mountain Forest

The primary function of the mountain forest is to provide lumber for the regular rebuildings of the main Ise Shrines every 20 years. This is an enormous enterprise that guarantees the survival of traditional carpentry techniques, and the full involvement of local and national support communities. It also consumes the main energies of Ise Shrine Staff. In addition The forest is mapped in grids, and key trees are marked (white lines at chest height) if they are thought to have significant future value as lumber.

The mountain forest covers approximately 8,000 hectares interspersed with similar forest maintained by the government, as National Parkland. Within this there are several categories of governmental protection.

The strictest rules apply to some small areas of Japanese cypress: no human-made tracks, and no felling/trimming are allowed. Restrictions are variously relaxed for other zones.

The last category allows access by road and commercial management, and some of the timber is marketed commercially, i.e. not used for shrine rebuilding. The different forest regimes, and the different zones of authority (ie shrine or local/national government) seem to merge happily together.



Scenes from the Ise Grand Shrine complex including the temizu ritual - cleansing of face and hands with pure water – which is carried out at the start of a shrine visit (top left). Photos by Victoria Finlay and Susie Weldon of ARC

CHALLENGES

There were, however, some problems, and in 1995 the general standards of forest management did not come up to what would be expected in commercially managed forests elsewhere. For example, trimmed branches were allowed to block up streams. Trees were assessed & measured at chest height (which is not a standard measure in international forestry) and the grid pattern in which trees were planted was considered inadequate.

In particular, the remaining stumps of several Japanese cypress trees showed clear signs of rot. According to the Chief Forester This is a blight that affects about 10% of all Japanese cypresses seemed thus affected – but with no sign of the problem increasing. He attributed the problem to deer, which had nibbled the bark off saplings, despite the protective fences surrounding them. No treatment of any kind had been applied to them, unlike the practise in many other forests around the world. Instead the practice was to invite local hunting associations to cull the deer - a cultural and cost-free solution involving the local community.

FUTURE

Although the hope is to provide as much lumber as possible for the shrine rebuilding, over 50% of the necessary timber still comes from other forests in Nagano prefecture where Ise is sited. The primary commitment remains to generate mixed forest, with the full complement of associated flora and fauna. This produced a much richer ecology than plantation forest, with accordingly less need for close management to preserve the environment.

2. Kashihara Jingu Shrine

Background

The 50-hectare Kashihara forest is of great antiquity and national importance, since it is where Jinmu, the first Emperor, was said to have been formally enthroned in 660 BC. Today it is an example of recent forestation of a sacred area, and a situation where the shrine authorities are seeking advice in forest management.

2.1 Forest

The first shrine buildings were built in 1890 and the extensive surrounding forest was created by public subscription and volunteer labour in the early 1940s. *Kashihara* means 'plain of oaks', and this is how the area must have appeared in ancient times although few oaks remain visible today. By 1940, when the government acquired the area, it had become farmland. The volunteers seem to have contributed primarily Japanese cedar and cypress seedlings.

Comprehensive forest management came to a halt at the end of World War II – soon after planting – and only re-started in around 2001. Restoration of the ancient "plain of oaks" remains a hope for many, but for the moment the shrine is aiming to do the best with what it has inherited. Thinning for example is a major challenge, since in many areas the trees are far too close together to grow freely in all directions.

There are now four kinds of woodland:

- sacred forest behind the shrine buildings;
- semi-sacred 'parkland' close to the shrine buildings, open to public access but requiring reverent behaviour;
- parkland further away from the shrine buildings, open for family recreation;
- a wilder forest on the hill above the shrine, with access limited to a single track.

CHALLENGES

There was major typhoon damage in 1998, dealt with by managed regeneration. The available shrine labour is limited, and most forest work is out-sourced to professional (secular) companies. Outside labour (& likewise pilgrims/visitors) would never cut down/trim/molest etc. any trees without specific instructions from shrine staff, since there is a general fear of antagonizing the *kami*.

3. Omiwa Shrine

Includes 400 hectares of sacred mountain forest with what is often called the most ancient shrine in Japan. It was the location of the main shrine for *Ameterasu-omikami* (Sun-Goddess and ancestress of the imperial line) until that shrine was removed to Ise in the 7th century. Until recently, the mountain and its forest were banned to all except priests. Today, the forest immediately above the shrine buildings is surrounded

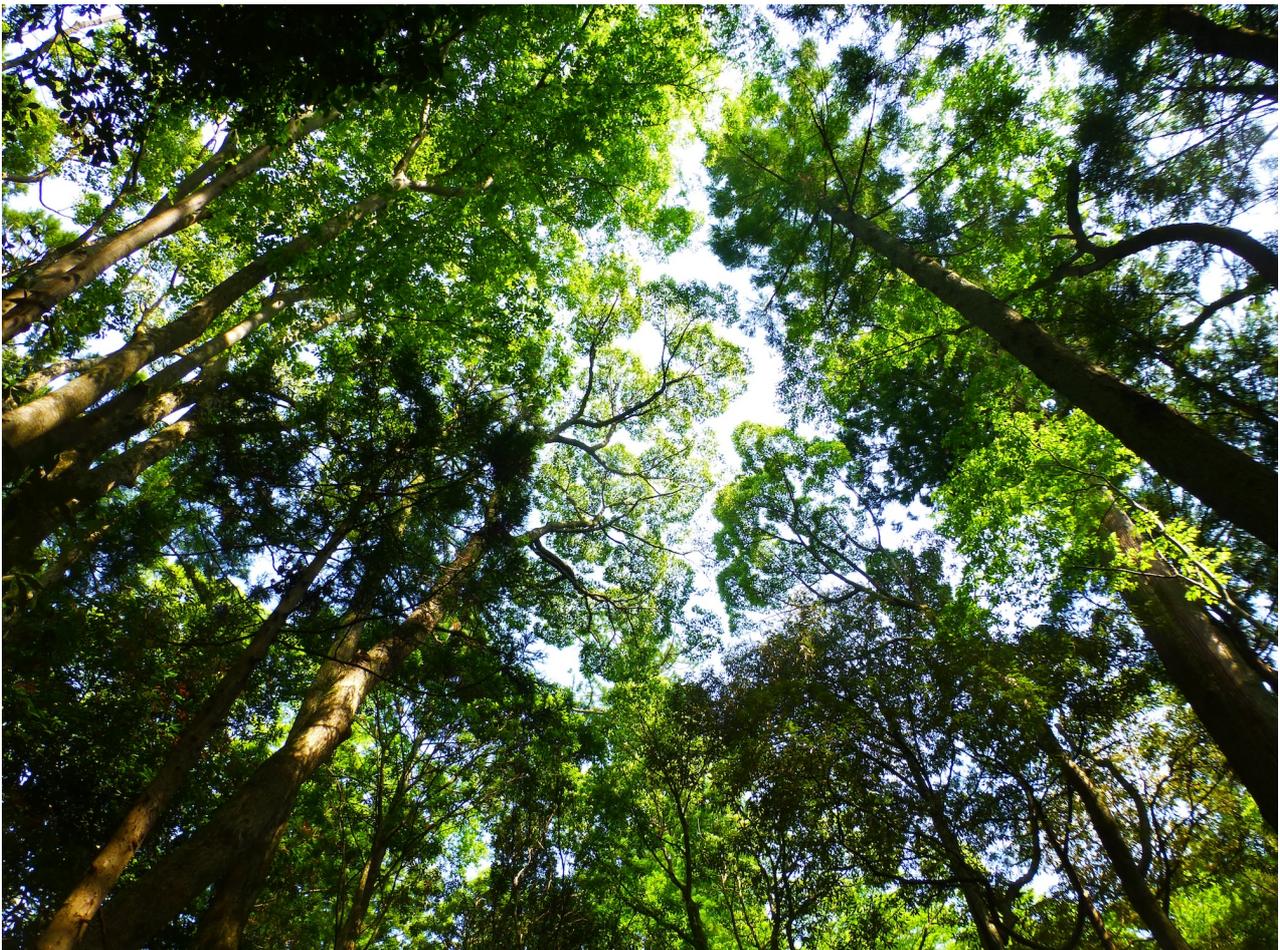
by a fence. The rest is open to the public, with permission. Unlike more recent shrines, there is no 'holy of holies' inner sanctum. Instead, the focus is upon the whole forest and mountain as a most holy area. Consequently, no photos are allowed at all.

CHALLENGES

Serious typhoon damage also occurred in 1998, and the effects remain visible, especially near the summit. Although today there is mostly cedar & cypress, Japanese red pine had dominated until about two generations ago, when it was decimated by a bug infestation which swept Japan. The cedar & cypress were replanted manually. However, this was also the ancient primary forest prior to the planting of red pine during the Edo period (1600 - 1868), preceded by a century of civil war, when government/war-lords had ordered forests (even at Omiwa san) to be cut down. Hence, although Omiwa shrine, and its forest, have an ancient history probably spanning at least 2,000 years, very clearly there have been periods in which even sacred forests have not been protected.

This report is based on notes from a field visit to Shinto forests conducted by ARC with Swedish Lutheran WWF and FSC forestry specialists, hosted by the Jinja Honjo in October 2005.

Original story: [http://www.arcworld.org/projects0e56.html?projectID=345'](http://www.arcworld.org/projects0e56.html?projectID=345)



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