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**Community Revitalization" by the Hands of Residents**

**----The strength of amateurs is solid technology that suits their size**

By Mitsuko Hikita

Executive Director, NPO Shirataka Area Revitalization Network

　In June 2013, after the accident at the Fukushima nuclear power plant, about 50 residents of Shirataka Town in Yamagata Prefecture launched the NPO Shirataka Community Revitalization Network (hereafter referred to as "Revitalization Network") with the goal of eliminating nuclear power and building a local recycling-based economy using renewable energy. Several founders asked their acquaintances to join them, and people from various occupations gathered, including presidents of construction and sewing companies, store owners, farmers, current and former town council members, and housewives. We held regular study sessions on solar power and forest biomass power generation, and debated what kind of natural energy would best suit local conditions.

　However, in July of 2013 and 2014, the town was hit by torrential rains for the second year in a row, resulting in landslides and river flooding here and there, causing tremendous damage. Photos of cedar trees uprooted and flowing into rivers were published in the town newsletter, which made us realize for the first time that our own backwoods were in danger. In recent years, however, due to the aging of the population and the lack of successors, the forests have turned into incense forests (Note 1) without proper care. Although the frequent occurrence of torrential rains was a direct cause, it was clear that the indirect cause of forest degradation was the source of the disaster.

**The Challenge of Creating Forests**

　There was a growing awareness that it was not enough to think about energy, and that our lives were in danger if we did not pay attention to the state of our forests. What should we do with our forests?" "What makes a forest resistant to disasters? What should we do with our forests? We also invited forestry experts to hold workshops on thinning for amateurs, so that they could create healthy, disaster-resistant forests on their own.

　In the meantime, we learned about the Forestry Agency's "Grant for Measures to Demonstrate the Multifunctional Functions of Forests and Mountain Villages" and decided to use it to actually start forestation. The Revitalization Net acted as the secretariat and formed the implementing body by calling on property districts (common forests) and individual mountain owners. The Goji Association, a temple with a large forest area, also joined the group. In addition to the members of the Revitalization Net, ward mayors, property ward officers, and temple priests have joined the meetings.

　The "multifaceted grant" is a grant that can be used to pay for human resources for forest maintenance, which was perfect for us as we wanted to create forests with the hands of local residents. Thanks to this, we have cleared 90 hectares of forest in the past three years. The key to creating forests for amateurs lies in learning safe and reliable techniques. With the grant money, we paid skilled instructors to hold small-group "chainsaw workshops" at various locations. In addition to chain saw operation and tree felling procedures, the workshops provided detailed instructions on how to clean the inside of the equipment, maintenance such as sharpening, and selection of economical oil.

The workshop was well received by the participants. We also held a training session on tree selection to develop an eye for which trees should be left and which should be cut down when thinning.

　This summer, we also held a three-day "Road Network Training" with a forestry expert from Yoshino who has been doing selective logging (Note 2) for many years. Rather than carving out a European-style road wide enough for high performance machinery to pass through, we created a road network 2.5 meters wide enough for a light truck to pass through, drawing the route in our minds while considering the topography and soil quality of the mountain. The instructor led the group on a half-day survey of the target forest, and over the next day and a half, about 40 meters of the road was constructed. During the lecture, the forester said, "(The road network I teach is) the same as the Ho Chi Minh route, not for the regular army but for the guerrillas. It is a road that cannot be recognized from a distance, and is the most disaster-resistant and unbreakable road. The local people will protect the forest and make a living by themselves in a way that suits their size. These words illuminated the path we should take.

　Not only from the perspective of renewable energy, but also by moving in the direction of healthy forest creation and its use for biomass, the image of "regional revitalization" from a more comprehensive perspective is being shared by my colleagues.

By moving in this direction, the image of "regional revitalization" from a more comprehensive perspective is being shared by our colleagues.

Note 1: An artificial forest that is left unattended, so that light does not reach the ground and nutrients on the surface of the earth are washed away by rain, resulting in a line of trees that do not grow tall and fat.

Note 2〉Where trees are generally cut down after 40 to 50 years, trees are selected and felled over a long period of time (100 to 200 years) so that the conservation function of the forest can be maintained.