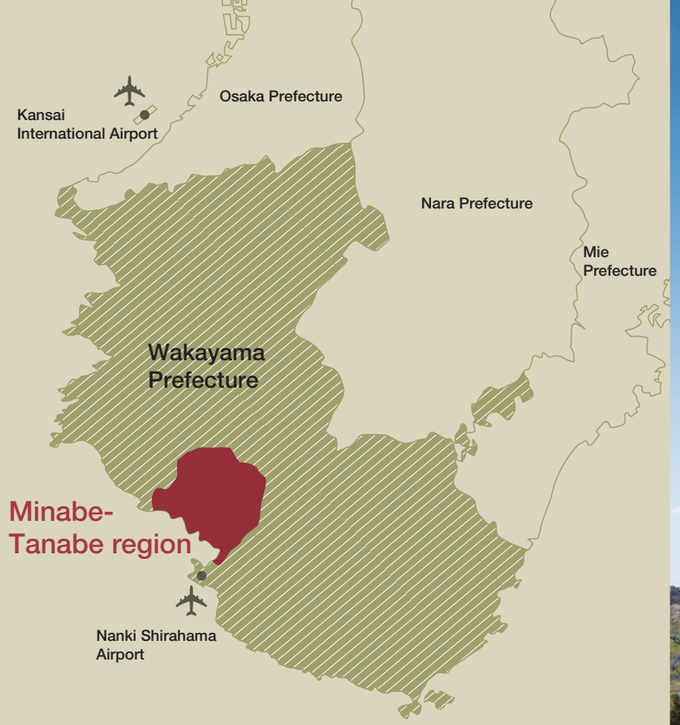
About the Minabe-Tanabe Region

The Minabe-Tanabe Region, which is located near the southwestern coast of the Kii Peninsula, has a population of approximately 78,000 (as of June 2016). With a cultivation area of 4,180 ha, an annual yield of 60,100 t (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries data, 2014), which represents over 50% of the Japanese annual yield, the region is known as “Japan’s Number 1 Ume Producer.” Of particular note is the “Nanko-ume,” which in 1965 was selected as the region’s standard variety of ume. This variety is the representative top-brand Japanese ume and is cherished as the country’s finest umeboshi.

What is GIAHS?

Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS) was first implemented by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in 2002. It was begun to preserve and pass onto future generations traditional farming methods, the culture and scenery of traditional farming villages, and ecosystems teeming in biodiversity that in recent years have been in danger of being lost due to the increasing size of agricultural production, selective cultivation, the widespread use of fertilizers, and other aspects of the modernization of agriculture. As of March 2017, 37 regions in 16 countries in Africa, Latin America, and Asia – including the Oldonyonokie/Olkeri Maasai Pastoralist Heritage in Kenya and the Floating Garden Agricultural Practices in Bangladesh – have been designated as globally important regions of sustainable agriculture. Currently, 8 regions in Japan, including the Minabe-Tanabe Ume System, have been designated as GIAHS.



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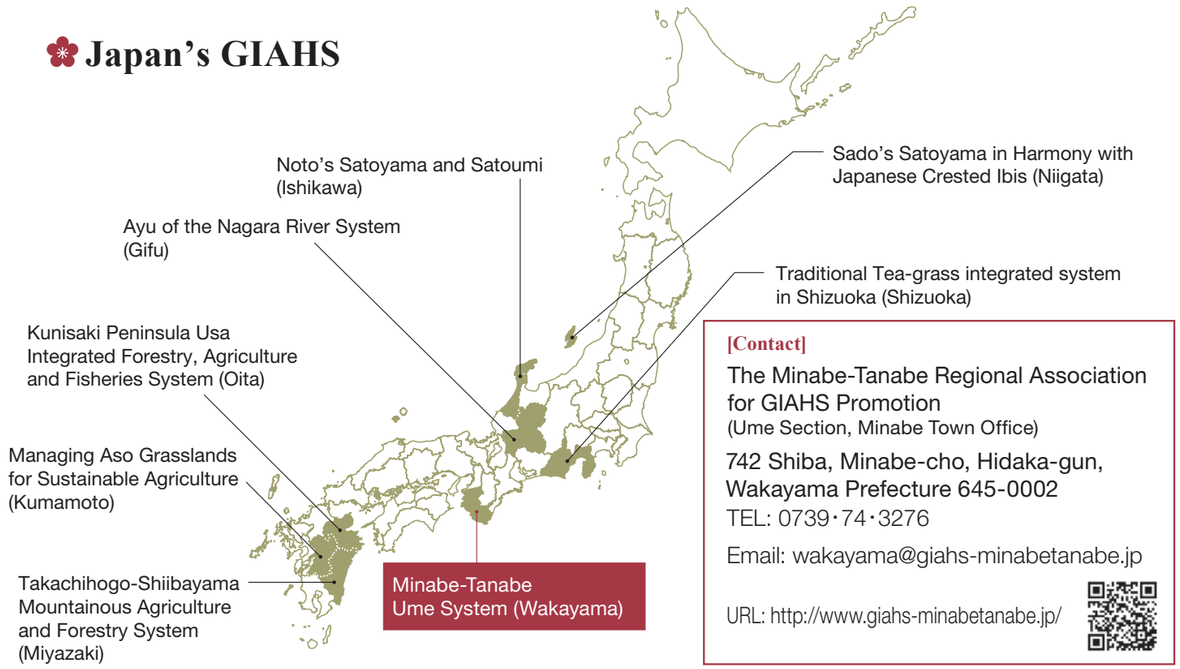
The shortest way from Tokyo is by air. The flight from Haneda Airport to Nanki Shirahama Airport takes approximately 1 hour 15 minutes, with another 30 minutes by car from the airport to the region itself. The flight from Haneda Airport to Kansai International Airport takes approximately 1 hour 10 minutes, with an additional train or car ride of approximately 1 hour 30 minutes from the airport to the region itself. By train from JR Shin-Osaka Railway Station the trip takes approximately 2 hours, and from JR Kyoto Railway Station the trip takes approximately 2 hours 30 minutes.

Japan’s GIAHS



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GIAHS

Minabe-Tanabe Ume System

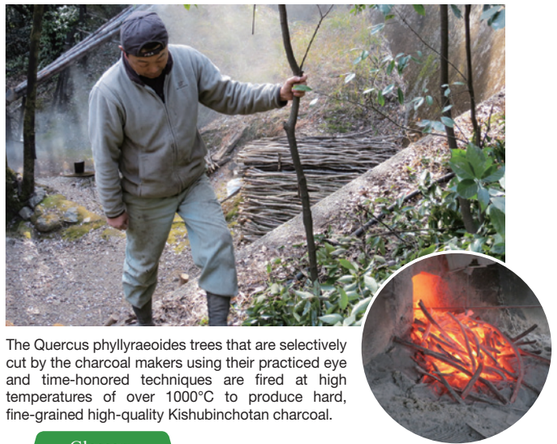
The Minabe-Tanabe Ume System was designated as a Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System (GIAHS) by the Steering and Scientific Committee Meeting GIAHS of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) on December 15, 2015.

The Traditional Minabe-Tanabe Ume System

In December 2015, a sustainable agriculture system with a 400-year history and is mainly focused on the ume (Prunus mume, Japanese apricot) was designated as one of the GIAHS. The Minabe-Tanabe Region where these ume are grown has received high praise for its production of high-quality ume while leaving coppice forests untouched and by ensuring watershed conservation and the prevention of slope collapses by locating ume orchards on mountainsides. The region has also been highly praised for its use of Japanese honeybees (Apis cerana japonica) to pollinate ume blossoms and for maintaining the abundant biodiversity of the region by preserving the natural environment of its satoyama and lowland satoyama areas.

1 Protecting mountains with Kishubinchotan charcoal "coppice forests"

The people of the Minabe-Tanabe Region have maintained the traditional custom of leaving the coppice forests untouched by using only part of the mountainous areas for ume orchards. Charcoal makers protect against destruction of the mountains by landslides and other disasters by selectively cutting the Quercus phyllyraeoides (Ubame-Gashi in Japanese; "gashi" means "oak") or oaks that they use as the raw material for Kishubinchotan charcoal. The steadfast management and maintenance efforts made by the charcoal makers maintain the "health" of the mountains and thereby ensure sustainable agriculture.

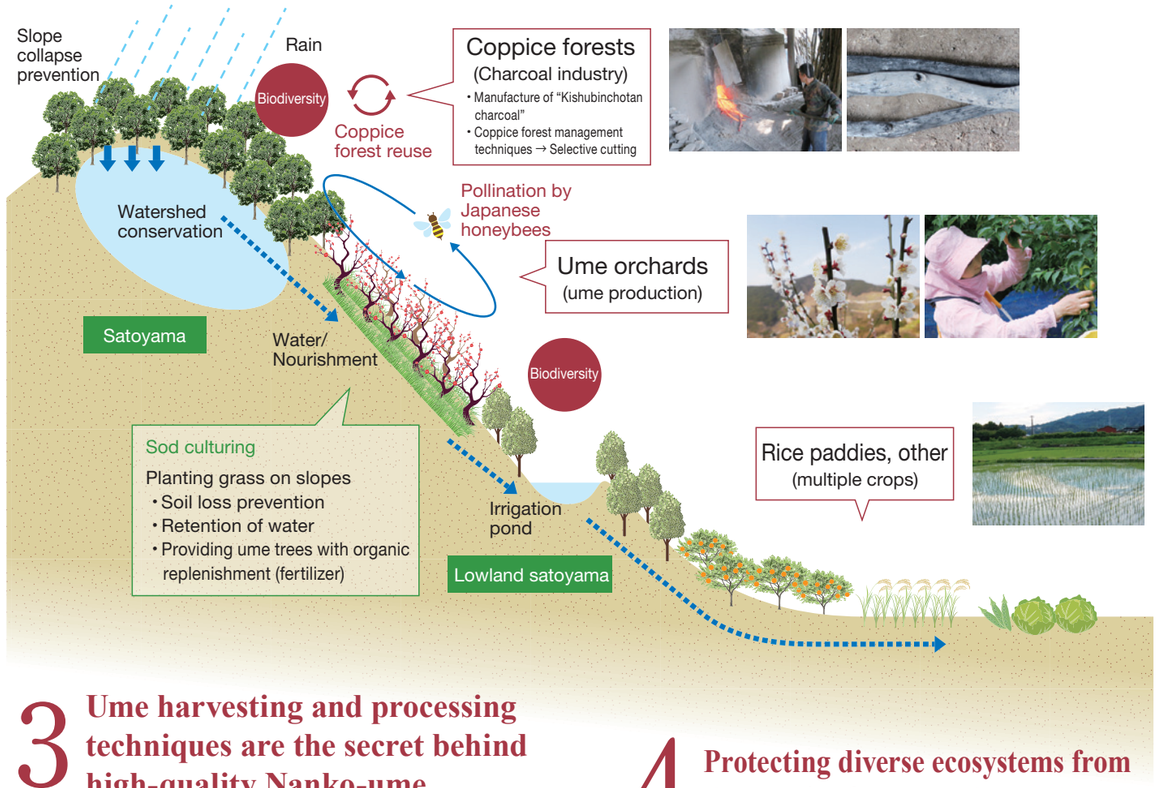


The Quercus phyllyraeoides trees that are selectively cut by the charcoal makers using their practiced eye and time-honored techniques are fired at high temperatures of over 1000°C to produce hard, fine-grained high-quality Kishubinchotan charcoal.

Ume orchards have a different look in each season. Large numbers of tourists come to see the ume blossoms when they are in bloom.

2 Ume grows thanks to pollination by honeybees

Because many of the varieties of ume that are cultivated in the Minabe-Tanabe Region are unable to self-pollinate, different varieties of ume are planted nearby so that their pollen can be used for pollination. As it would be extremely difficult to pollinate several hundred trees by hand, Japanese honeybees have long been used for this purpose. Ume, which bloom in the early spring when few other flowers are in bloom, are an important source of nectar for the bees that inhabit the area, and provide them with an opportunity to "train" before their most active season begins. This coexistence between ume and honeybees was praised as a form of GIAHS.



3 Ume harvesting and processing techniques are the secret behind high-quality Nanko-ume

Most ume producers in the Minabe-Tanabe Region are involved up to the primary processing of harvested ume into shiraboshiume (salt-pickled ume). Therefore, Nanko-ume are raised to be good quality umeboshi from the cultivation stage. The processing companies are also very familiar with the appeal and characteristics of Nanko-ume. This close coordination between the local producers and the processing companies was another point that was highly praised as a GIAHS.

Nanko-ume are harvested after ripening. In the Minabe-Tanabe Region, their beautiful appearance is protected by a system unique to the region in which nets are set up on the slopes where ume are grown so that the fruit is not damaged even if it happens to fall off the tree.

4 Protecting diverse ecosystems from the coppice forests to the seashore

Accipiter nisus (European Sparrow Hawk) and Accipiter gentilis (Northern Goshawk) live in the ume orchards and coppice forests of the Minabe-Tanabe Region. Butastur indicus (Grey-faced Buzzard Eagle) and Pernis ptilorhynchus (Oriental Honey Buzzard) have been seen flying above the region. In addition, rare species such as Hynobius nebulosus and Cynops pyrrhogaster have been seen in the irrigation ponds in the valleys and the rice paddies in the lowland satoyama areas. Senrinohama Beach (Minabe Town) is most densely populated spawning ground for Caretta caretta in all of Honshu. Because the region is protected against soil collapse and loss by the Minabe-Tanabe Ume System and because comprehensive measures to protect the natural environment are in place, the ecosystems used by a wide diversity of living things have remained protected.

Glossary

Coppice forests ▶ Forests for firewood and raw materials used in the production of charcoal. They are mixed forests located in satoyama regions that are composed of Quercus phyllyraeoides, oak, Quercus acutissima (sawtooth oak), Quercus serrata, Prunus serrulata, hackberry, and other types of trees. They are managed and maintained through periodic upkeep provided by humans.

Kishubinchotan charcoal ▶ "White charcoal" that is made using a unique process in which Quercus phyllyraeoides and oak wood are steamed at high temperatures and then covered in ashes outside the kiln in order to put out the flames. The Kishubinchotan produced in the Minabe-Tanabe Region has received high praise from professional chefs as the best charcoal available.

Watershed conservation ▶ Forest soil functions as a trap for rainwater and thereby ensure the water supply. Watershed conservation programs include efforts to control the water level in rivers in order to prevent flooding and maintain a stable flow rate of river water. As rainwater passes through the forest soil, the soil functions as a water purifier.

Selective cutting ▶ A method of tree pruning in which only the branches of the thickness required to make charcoal are cut during the trimming of "multi-trunk trees" that have more than one trunk. By leaving the thinner branches untouched, tree growth is allowed to continue, which leads to renewal of the forest.

Glossary

Nanko-ume ▶ Ume that are raised and selected in the town of Minabe, Wakayama Prefecture. They are characterized by thin skins and an abundance of soft pulp. They are considered the finest type of ume for making umeboshi (pickled ume).

Japanese honeybees ▶ Honeybees that have long lived in the hills and fields of Japan. They are known to gather nectar from flowers from the spring until the fall. In recent years their numbers have been falling in natural forests, and as a result they are considered to be endangered.

Self-pollination (self-compatibility) ▶ Pollen from the one variety of plant arrives on the pistil of another plant of the same variety and results in pollination. Many varieties of ume have to be pollinated by different varieties of ume.

Glossary

Unripe ume/Ripe ume ▶ Unripe ume are ume that are not yet ripe. They are used to make ume liquor, ume juice, ume sour and other products. Ripe ume are fully ripe ume that are yellow in color. They feature soft pulps and a pleasant fragrance and are perfect for making umeboshi and ume jam.

Shiraboshiume (salt-pickled ume) ▶ A traditional type of salty umeboshi that is washed and pickled in salt after harvesting. Although they are sometimes used as an ingredient for flavored umeboshi, in the Minabe-Tanabe Region the simple shiraboshiume are considered the standard type of "umeboshi."

Flavored umeboshi ▶ Umeboshi made through a process by which processing companies wash the salt off of shiraboshiume and either pickle them with other materials or flavor them by pickling them in flavored liquid. They can be found in a variety of flavors, including Shisozukeumeboshi (perilla-flavored pickled ume), konbuumeboshi (kelp-flavored pickled ume), katsuoumeboshi (bonito-flavored pickled ume), and hachimitsuumeboshi (honey-flavored pickled ume).

Kishu Ume Association

Giving thanks for and passing on the blessings of the satoyama

The Kishu Ume Association, which is made up of municipalities, agricultural organizations, and umeboshi processor associations, has designated June 6 as "Ume Day." This is because at an annual festival held at Kamo-jinja shrine in Kyoto on June 6, 1545, the Emperor at the time is said to have offered a gift of ume. Each year on June 6 ume are presented to Kamigamo-jinja shrine and Shimogamo-jinja shrine (both in Kyoto) as well as Suga-jinja shrine (Minabe Town) and Kumano Hongu Taisha Grand Shrine (Tanabe City) during a Shinto ritual held to offer thanks for the harvest.