

KANSAI & WEST



Courtesy of the Senior Nature College
Above: Yasuyoshi Kotani, Ikeda-zumi charcoal master in Nosecho, Osaka Prefecture, explains the process of charcoal production in front of a kiln.

Left: People who attended a lecture on charcoal production prepare kunugi sawtooth oak timber to make charcoal.

Fanning the flame

Dying breed of charcoal makers fire up support

By Hiroyuki Ueba
Daily Yomiuri Staff Writer

OSAKA—Hope is burning brighter for producers of Ikeda-zumi charcoal, as the efforts of a civic group are helping preserve the traditional but dying art.

Used in tea ceremonies for centuries, the charcoal is currently produced in the mountains of northern Osaka and eastern Hyogo prefectures. But production has decreased and is on the verge of dying out altogether due to a lack of successors in the charcoal business.

Ikeda-zumi is also known as kiku-zumi because its end grain looks like a chrysanthemum (kiku). The charcoal is sold for ¥3,000 to ¥5,000 a kilogram, about 10 times the price of ordinary charcoal used for fuel.

Hisanori Saeki, tea master of the Mushanokoji Senke school, believes Ikeda-zumi charcoal is the best for making tea, saying: "It has mild heating properties, so it doesn't harm an iron pot, and it's easy to control. But it gets hot enough to boil water."

There are currently only seven Ikeda-zumi masters. Nosecho, Toyonocho and Mino in Osaka Prefecture each have one, and there are four living in Kawanishi, Hyogo Prefecture, all of whom are in their 70s. As the job is so dirty and demanding, it is virtually impossible to find young people willing to take it up.

Kunugi sawtooth oak, from which the charcoal is made, is also on the decline. In forests in Nosecho, six- to 10-year-old oaks, which are the best for Ikeda-zumi, cover 4,750 square meters. But there are virtually no forests with one- to five-year-old oaks, a recent study by the prefectural government showed.

However, a civic group involved in nature conservation and outdoor activities organized a course last year on how the charcoal is manufactured.

The Senior Nature College, a nonprofit organization based in Fukushima Ward, Osaka, consisting mainly of retirees, has played a central role in the efforts.

Masakatsu Tsutsumi, 65, one of the NPO's board members, learned about the charcoal produced in Mino, where he resides, five years ago when he retired from Sumitomo Metal Industries, Ltd. and joined the group's activities. "I learned about the difficulties faced by the manufacturers, and I wanted to do something to keep the local tradition alive," he said.

Tsutsumi proposed Ikeda-zumi charcoal as one of the NPO's projects.

With the help of 77-year-old Yasuyoshi Kotani, Nosecho's lone Ikeda-zumi master, the NPO organized a course on manufacturing the charcoal in September. The course was attended by 23 people.

Those attending the course repaired a kiln, which Kotani had not used for years, and made charcoal from oak trees cut down in the mountains.

According to Tsutsumi, a similar course will begin in autumn. "More than 50 people have already inquired about it, although we haven't started accepting applications yet," he said.

Noboru Sakamoto, 53, who took the course last year, now resides in Nosecho and is learning more about charcoal from Kotani with the goal of starting his own charcoal enterprise. To do this, he has given up his trucking business.

He said he came across a news story about the decline of Ikeda-zumi, which he regarded as fate. "I thought, 'This is what I want to do,'" he said.

Sakamoto wanted a job where he could work outdoors, so he immediately telephoned the Osaka prefectural government's forestry office and asked whether it would be possible for him to learn about charcoal manufacturing. But he had to wait about two months before applications for the course were accepted.

During last year's course, after an exhausting three months working in the mountains, cutting down oak trees and repairing a clay kiln, Sakamoto and the others finally took charcoal they had made from the kiln in late January. "I was very happy. I felt like I'd been hit by a thunderbolt when I first saw the charcoal we'd burned," he said.

After completing the seven-month course, Sakamoto decided to study charcoal production under Kotani. He moved to Nosecho in March, while his wife and two teenage sons remained in Yao. "I made the decision myself," Sakamoto said,

although his wife opposed the idea because of the uncertainty of the trade and the drop in family income.

Charcoal is only made in winter because the heat involved would make it unbearable in the summer. So in summer Sakamoto works as a cableway operator in Nosecho.

"I'm a bit worried about the future, but I'm happy because I can do what I want to do. So I'm confident," he said.

Kotani is pleased by the recent support from the Senior Nature College and other organizations, but he feels that the problems may not be so easy to solve. "Their help is great, but they are still outsiders. I must do something myself to ensure Ikeda-zumi survives," he said.

Kotani was impressed with Sakamoto's determination. "I thought at first he was not serious, but he seems to be really willing. I want to help him as much as I can."

Kotani, who used to work for the Osaka prefectural government, has made charcoal for 17 years since he retired in 1988. As he did not want to live out his life in quiet retirement, he decided that producing charcoal, which he had learned in his teens from his father and grandfather, was something he could do in addition to farming. He believed charcoal production could help keep his family's forests in good condition.

When Kotani started making charcoal, there were only three manufacturers in Nosecho, all over 70 years old. With their help, he built kilns and learned the necessary techniques.

Kotani produces a few hundred kilograms of charcoal between October and April every year.

A history in charcoal

The history of Ikeda-zumi charcoal can be traced back to the 12th century. It was produced in the mountains of what are now northern Osaka and eastern Hyogo prefectures, stockpiled

in Ikeda and shipped to other areas.

According to a historical document in Kyuanji temple in Ikeda, the charcoal was dedicated to the Imperial family between 1145 and 1870. Toyotomi Hideyoshi, a 16th-century feudal lord, praised the charcoal at a tea ceremony at the temple in 1595, according to another temple document.

Tea master Saeki said high-quality ash can be obtained from the charcoal. In tea ceremonies ash is sculpted in a brazier into elegant shapes, such as a mountain, and this is an admired part of the tea ceremony. "Ash taken from the charcoal is made of small particles and is very smooth," Saeki said. "No other charcoal can match the quality."

Production of Ikeda-zumi reached its zenith in 1927 with 497 tons. Most of the charcoal was used as domestic fuel because gas was not available in many households. However, its production steadily decreased, and only a few tons have been produced in recent decades in Osaka Prefecture.

Kazuo Mural, an Osaka prefectural government official, cited two main reasons for the production decline: a change in energy needs and sources, and the advance of agricultural technology. Cheaper and easier-to-handle forms of energy, such as gas and electricity, have become readily available.

Advances in farming technology have made it possible for farmers to cultivate commercial crops during winter. Mural said: "Charcoal producing was a job farmers did to earn cash in winter. However, with greenhouses, improvements in breeding and other technological advances, farmers can farm in winter and make more money than they would producing charcoal."

According to Kotani, six- to 10-year-old oaks of eight to 10 centimeters in diameter are best suited for Ikeda-zumi.

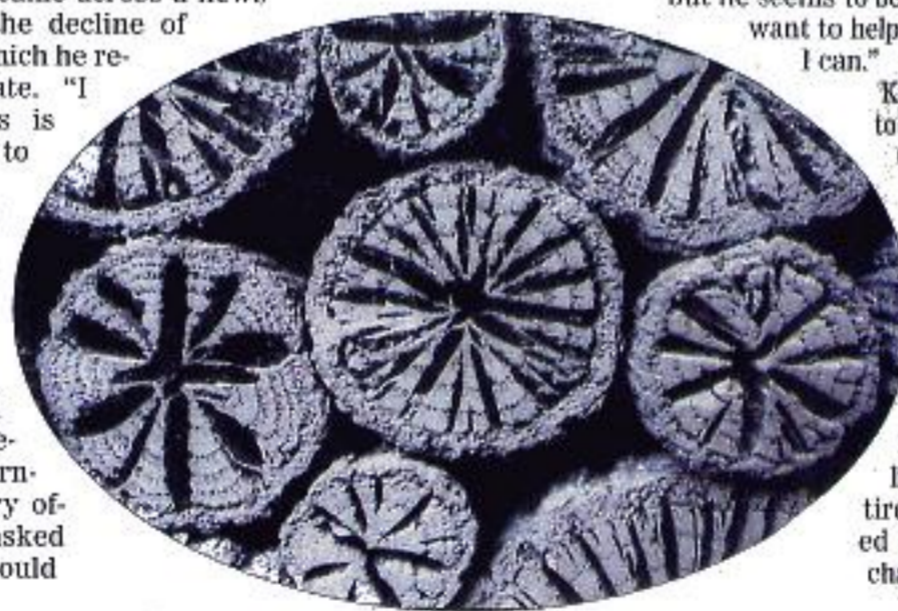
But Kunugi sawtooth oak is becoming scarce. After World War II, natural oak forests were cut down and cedar and cypress were planted to increase the timber supply.

Concerned about the oak supply, Kotani said, "Techniques can be passed down, but without kunugi oaks, we can't do anything."

Therefore, the Senior Nature College plans to launch a program this year to plant oak seedlings in the area.

Tsutsumi believes that it will not be easy to revive Ikeda-zumi. However, he said, "We want to increase awareness about the charcoal through lectures."

Kotani said, "I'll continue producing Ikeda-zumi as long as I can because I like the work, although it's so physically demanding that my wife has asked me to stop."



The cut edges of Ikeda-zumi charcoal resemble a chrysanthemum.

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WHAT'S ON

TALLIS SCHOLARS: July 1, 7 p.m. at Alt Hall in Kamigyo Ward, Kyoto. The English cappella ensemble will sing various songs, including Byrd's "Feasts of All Saints—Mass Propers." Tickets are ¥6,000 for adults and ¥5,500 for students. (075) 441-1414

OSAKA SYMPHONIKER: July 3, 3 p.m. at Wadayama Jupiter Hall in Asago, Hyogo Prefecture. The orchestra will play Glinka's "Rouslan and Ludmila."

students, and ¥1,500 for high school students and younger. Tickets at the door will be ¥3,500 and ¥2,000, respectively. (079) 672-1000

TREASURES FROM KOFUKUJI: Until July 10 at Osaka Municipal Museum of Art in Tennoji Ward, Osaka. The exhibition features about 80 items, including Buddhist sculptures and archaeological materials from Kofukuji temple in Nara. Open 9:30 a.m.-5 p.m. Closed Mondays. Admission is ¥1,300 for adults, ¥800 for university and high school students and free for middle school students and younger. (06) 6771-4874

The exhibition introduces prints from the late 19th to early 20th centuries by great masters such as Munch, Redon and Picasso. Open 9:30 a.m.-5 p.m. Closed Mondays. Admission is ¥400 for adults, ¥250 for university students and free for high school students and younger. (073) 436-8690

CANADA DAY PARTY: July 5, 6:30 p.m.-8:30 p.m., at Hotel New Otani Osaka in Chuo Ward, Osaka. ¥7,500. Apply by July 1. (06) 4790-3220

DESIGN 21: Until July 5 at Kobe Fashion Museum in Higashinada Ward, Kobe. The exhibition features about 60 award-winning fashion works for the

¥500 for adults, and ¥250 for high, middle and primary school students. (078) 858-0050

INTERNATIONAL KIDS SUMMER SCHOOL: July 5-15 at Mikage International Pre-School (078) 851-8502, and July 18-29 at Ashiya International School (0797) 35-5011. English songs, dances and games will be featured.

WORKS OF ART BY FOREIGN STUDENTS: July 2-8 at Gallery Fleur of Kyoto Seika University in Sakyo Ward, Kyoto. Works of art created by the university's students will be displayed. Admission is

Osaka Planning of Asian

The Yomiuri

OSAKA—The Osaka plans to hold a series of Asian cities in relations and improve the private sector.

Osaka Gov. Fusae Ueda, the meeting with the national government will be held in Seoul and Pusan.

The prefectural government will discuss how to make use of the greater exchanges with nations, and the Asian key to its policy to make a hub.

In the hope of making a gateway to Japan, many Korean residents want to establish a business in the East Asian region.

At the meeting, economic concerns, tourism and the prefectural government will include the following to enhance exchange: exchange of nonprofit organizations, and the Asian key to its policy to make a hub.

The discussion sees people, including Uchiyama Corp. They will examine the possibility to be released.

Kobe Oji Zoo: female snow leopard

For snow leopard

KOBE—Looking abroad, male snow leopard is endangered species.

There are only six snow leopards in the world.

"I suspect the snow leopard is in danger of extinction," said Yuji Maruyama, director of the Japanese Association for the Snow Leopard.

In the wild, snow leopards are hunted for their fur and bones.

Their numbers are declining rapidly.

According to the International Snow Leopard Foundation, there are about 4,000 snow leopards left in the world.

Mew was born in Kazakhstan and was brought to the zoo in 1997.

Females usually give birth to one or two cubs.

In Japan, snow leopards are kept in zoos.

They are used for research and education.

The snow leopard is a member of the big cat family.

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