

The Aso Grasslands are a gift from our ancestors

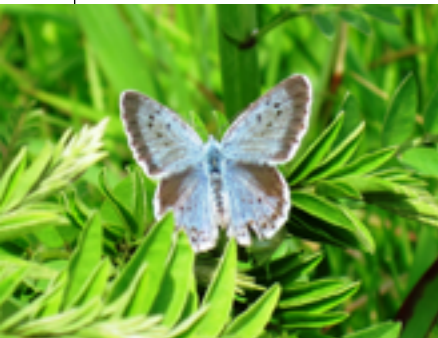
Grasslands are integral to the landscape of Aso. While they may look like they developed naturally, Aso's grasslands actually exist thanks to centuries of maintenance by the locals. The result is a diverse grassland ecosystem and rich landscape. Without the help of the locals, these "artificial" grasslands of Aso would revert into scrubland and forests. Aso's 2,200 hectares of grassland are Japan's largest and they represent a culture where people live in harmony with nature.



Q1 Why are Aso's grasslands important?

A1. They are a habitat for many living things.

There are about 600 plant species found in the grasslands of Aso, some of which are very rare. The region is home to all kinds of wildlife, birds, and insects. So many butterflies live here that Aso is known as a butterfly paradise!



The endangered orurishijimi butterfly



Haru gentian blooming in a meadow

A2. They absorb carbon dioxide.

By fixing carbon in the soil as ash and through root growth, grassland soils actually absorb more carbon dioxide into the ground than what is released into the atmosphere by controlled burns. This in turn helps prevent global warming.



A3. They help retain water.

Grasslands allow less water to evaporate and store more water underground than forests. The groundwater that originates in Aso's grasslands feeds six rivers, including the Shirakawa and Chikugo Rivers, in turn providing water for Fukuoka City, Kumamoto City, and other population centers.



By grazing on the grasslands, akaushi cattle play a role in their protection

A4. Grass is used as a resource.

Grass from the grasslands is used as fodder for cattle and horses. It is also a high-quality building material and is used throughout Japan to make thatched roofs for historical buildings.



Aso's sustainable agriculture involves a cycle of controlled burns, grazing by cattle and horses, and grass harvesting. This cycle earned Aso its designation as a Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System.



Q2 How are the grasslands maintained?

A. By human hands.

Through repeated cycles of controlled burns, cattle and horse grazing, and grass harvesting, Aso's grasslands have been protected by human hands for over 1,000 years. Noyaki (controlled burns) prevent the grasslands from turning into woodland and help eliminate pests that harm crops and animals. Noyaki require many people to be effective, but fewer farmers and an aging population have made it difficult for noyaki to be carried out in full. We need the understanding and support of many in order for the grasslands to survive.



Noyaki (controlled burns) clear the land of old growth