

ITOIGAWA SHIMPAKU PROJECT: LINKING CULTURAL, NATURAL AND GEOLOGICAL HERITAGE FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

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ABSTRACT

Bonsai is a cultural tradition with roughly 1,300 years of history in Japan, recognized and appreciated across the world. One of the most prized subjects in bonsai is the Sargent juniper (*Juniperus chinensis* var. *sargentii*), called 'shimpaku' in Japanese. A particularly well-regarded variety of shimpaku was discovered in Itoigawa in the early 20th century. The 'Itoigawa Shimpaku' is prized for its tightly bunched leaves, beautiful white wood and exceptional hardiness. It thrives in the rugged mountains of Itoigawa which formed along the Itoigawa-Shizuoka Tectonic Line, a massive fault closely connected to the formation of the Japanese island arc. After decades of collection, the Itoigawa Shimpaku has largely disappeared from its native habitats. Aging local communities are unable to manage the tree's native mountains and forests. Furthermore, younger generations are less interested in traditional arts making the future of the Itoigawa Shimpaku increasingly uncertain. In response to these issues, Itoigawa UNESCO Global Geopark launched the Itoigawa Shimpaku Project to engage local communities in how best to preserve this unique local heritage and to share it with a wider audience through community-led, experience-oriented tourism programs which link geological, natural and cultural heritage. The aim of this project is to encourage sustainable development, raise new generations of bonsai practitioners and promote responsible management of forests and mountains to ensure the Itoigawa Shimpaku's future for centuries to come. This paper will discuss the history of the Itoigawa Shimpaku as well as the background, main issues, and the current progress and future plans of the Itoigawa Shimpaku Project.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Bonsai¹, the traditional East Asian art of growing trees and other plants in decorative pots and trays, first arrived in Japan over 1,300 years ago from Tang China. Over the centuries it grew in popularity, first among the ruling elite then among merchants and commoners starting in the Edo period. Today, it is practiced by enthusiasts from all walks of life, both in Japan and throughout the world. Despite its origins in Ancient China, it is now widely considered a quintessential part of Japan's cultural heritage.

Many different tree and plant species are used in the cultivation of bonsai. The *ibuki* (Chinese juniper, *Juniperus chinensis*) had long been a popular subject in bonsai, but since its discovery on Mt. Ishizuchi in Ehime Prefecture (Shikoku Island) during the late 19th century, the Sargent juniper (*Juniperus chinensis* var. *sargentii*) has been one of the most prized subjects among enthusiasts. As this variant was first discovered deep within the mountains, it was given the Japanese name 'miyamabyakushin'² or 'deep mountain juniper.' However, today it is much more commonly known by the common name 'shimpaku' which means 'true juniper.' This epithet began among bonsai enthusiasts and reflects the status of the shimpaku as the juniper species most suited for bonsai.

¹ The word 'bonsai' derives from the Chinese characters '盆栽' meaning literally 'tray cultivation.'

² 深山柏榿, literally 'deep-mountain-cypress-evergreen'

By the turn of the 20th century, rampant collection had caused the shimpaku to almost vanish from the mountains of Shikoku. In 1907, shimpaku collector and Ehime-native Suzuki Tahei³ was returning from an expedition to Hokkaido when the steamer he was riding stopped off the coast of Itoigawa. The imposing limestone Mt. Kurohime caught Tahei's attention. Its rugged appearance reminded him of Mt. Ishizuchi, so he disembarked from the ship to search on Mt. Kurohime. Near the hamlet of Shimizukura in what is now Itoigawa City's Oumi District, Tahei discovered a new source of wild shimpaku. He resettled in Shimizukura to begin collecting and exporting the newly discovered trees.

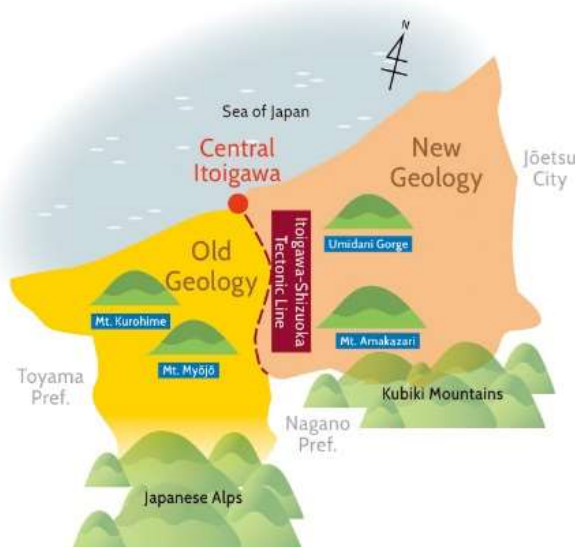
In 1910, more shimpaku were discovered on Mt. Myōjō in what is now Itoigawa City's Kotaki District. The shimpaku discovered in Itoigawa were regarded as particularly beautiful, with compact light green leaves, beautiful white wood and exceptional hardiness. As a result, they came to be known as a distinct form, the 'Itoigawa Shimpaku' (*Juniperus chinensis* var. *sargentii* 'Itoigawa'). This new tree quickly became a favorite among bonsai artists and collectors.

Apart from a temporary lull during the Second World War, collection and export of the Itoigawa Shimpaku progressed steadily, reaching a peak during the postwar economic boom. Many famous trees such as 'Hiryuu' (Flying Dragon) and 'Jū'un (Life-Cloud) were discovered during this time and the Itoigawa Shimpaku came to be celebrated as the "King of Bonsai." However, by the end of the 1970s, most of the trees had been harvested from the wild and collection efforts ceased.

Background and Current Situation

Today, the Itoigawa Shimpaku is considered a valuable part of Itoigawa's cultural heritage. Its enduring popularity as a subject in bonsai is a source of pride for many local residents. In the Itoigawa UNESCO Global Geopark, the Itoigawa Shimpaku is particularly recognized for its deep connection to local geological and natural heritage.

The Itoigawa Shimpaku is found in rocky, mountainous terrain. Its range extends from the limestone cliffs of Mt. Kurohime (1,221 m) and Mt. Myōjō (1,188 m) in the west to the volcanic cliffs of Mt. Amakazari (1,963 m) and the Kubiki Mountains in the east. (Fig. 1) These mountains straddle the Itoigawa-Shizuoka Tectonic Line, a massive fault which splits the Japanese island arc between east and west. This fault, one of the Itoigawa Geopark's most important themes, forms the boundary between the North American and Eurasian continental plates and played an instrumental role in the formation of the Japanese island arc and the Japanese Alps. The Itoigawa Shimpaku's hardiness and other distinguishing characteristics are a result of adaptation to the harsh conditions found in these mountains. The trees grow slowly over centuries as it clings to cracks and crevices on rocky cliffs. Summers can be hot and dry while winter temperatures drop below freezing with strong winds and heavy snowfall. This unforgiving natural environment, shaped by the area's exceptional geological history, gave birth to this cherished cultural heritage enjoyed by fans all over the world. Indeed, the Itoigawa Shimpaku is a perfect example of the close connections that can be drawn among geological, natural and cultural heritage—connections which are celebrated by UNESCO Global Geoparks.



³This name is written surname first as it is in Japanese.

Figure 1: Localities of the Itoigawa Shimpaku (blue) on mountains uplifted either side of the Itoigawa-Shizuoka Tectonic Line (red) in Itoigawa UNESCO Global Geopark

Unfortunately, the Itoigawa Shimpaku's popularity resulted in decades of intensive collection and today the Itoigawa Shimpaku has largely disappeared from its native habitats with only a few notable specimens remain in the wild. New specimens are no longer harvested from the wild, but the local communities which traditionally managed the mountains and forests are experiencing rapid population decline, with most residents over the age of 65. For example, the aforementioned Kotaki District, the largest Itoigawa Shimpaku locality, had 312 residents in 2000, but this had decreased by 2020 to only 94 residents, 78% of whom are over the age of 65. (Fig 2)

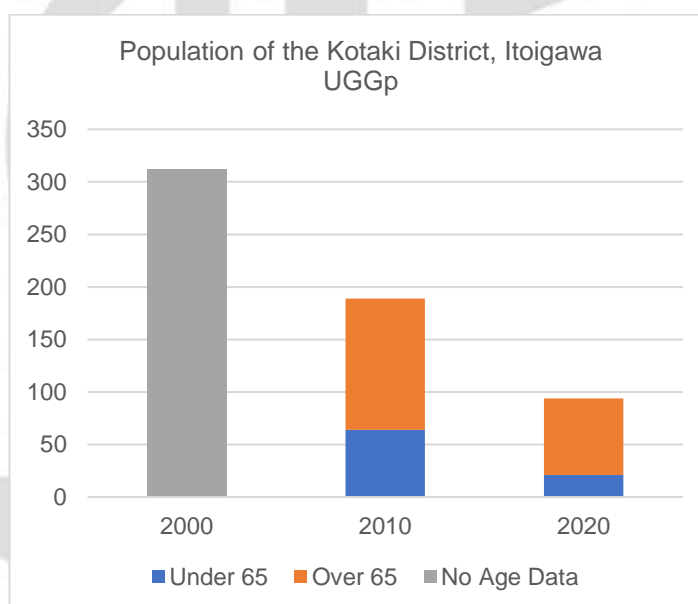


Figure 2: The population of the Kotaki District is no longer self-sustaining.

Itoigawa's bonsai community is also rapidly aging. Younger generations are less interested in traditional Japanese arts and bonsai in particular is generally viewed as a hobby for old men. The Itoigawa Chapter of the Nippon Bonsai Association has reduced from a peak of 45 members in the 1970s to 10 members, with no members under the age of 65.

2. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Itoigawa Shimpaku Project

To respond to these issues, Itoigawa UNESCO Global Geopark launched the Itoigawa Shimpaku Project in 2020 in cooperation with the Itoigawa Chapter of the Nippon Bonsai Association, the Nunagawa Wildflower Appreciation Society, the Kotaki Regional Development Association and the Itoigawa Tourism Association. This project promotes and celebrates the heritage and beauty of the Itoigawa Shimpaku through community workshops, tours and activity programs. Through a combination of local community engagement and tourism promotion, the project aims to encourage regional sustainable development, increase interest in bonsai among younger generations both in Itoigawa and across the world and increase awareness of conservation issues and the importance of responsible management of our forests and mountains.

In 2020, the first meetings were held between the Itoigawa Geopark Council and participating community organizations. Due to the events of the Global COVID-19 Pandemic, initial plans for a pilot tour program had to be

postponed, but a small pilot workshop was held for the local community. Additionally, promotional websites and pamphlets have been published in Japanese and English.

The pilot workshop was held on 14 November 2020. Eleven local community members joined the workshop, which consisted of a brief lecture on the history of the Itoigawa Shimpaku, a guided tour of three local bonsai gardens, and finally an activity in which participants made their own miniature Itoigawa Shimpaku bonsai. Reaction to the workshop was overwhelmingly positive, with most participants rating the workshop 5 out of a total of 6. (Fig. 3) Respondents to a participant survey wrote that the experience had changed their perception of bonsai, especially among those who had never attempted bonsai before. (Fig. 4) Of particular note was the number of female participants. Despite bonsai's longstanding cultural image as a pastime enjoyed by old men, over half of the participants were women, suggesting real potential for growth by increasing gender inclusivity. The survey responses will help in planning for new pilot programs in 2021.

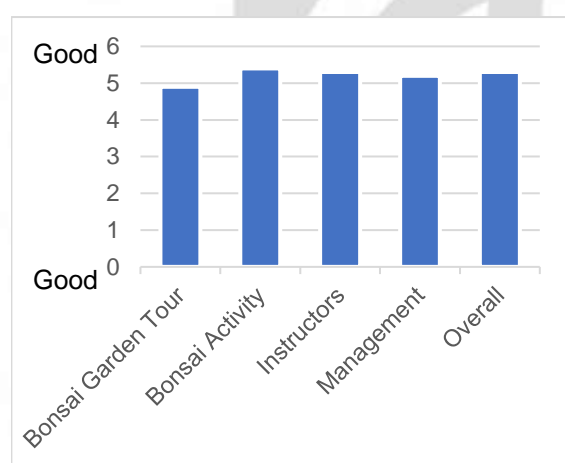


Figure 3: Opinion of the pilot workshop (out of 6)

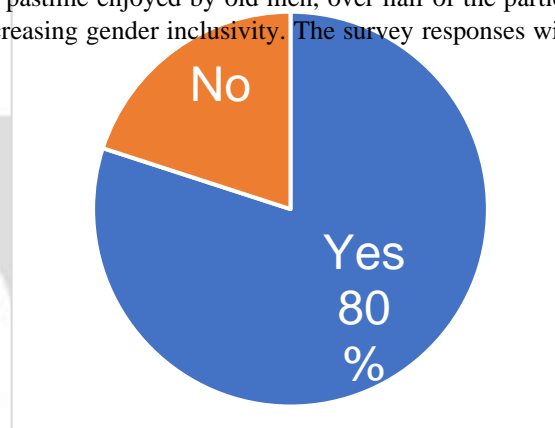


Figure 4: Proportion of respondents who answered that their opinion of bonsai changed after joining the program

Promotional materials produced in 2020 include a website (<https://shimpaku.geo-itoigawa.com>) and color pamphlet. Both are published in Japanese and English. The website includes information about the Itoigawa Shimpaku and the Itoigawa Shimpaku Project, with more information about tour and activity programs to be added as they are ready.

Future plans for the Itoigawa Shimpaku Project include two pilot tour programs to be offered in October 2021. The first pilot tour will be offered to travel agents and members of the media in order to promote the project and to receive professional advice about how to improve the tour programs. The second pilot tour will be offered to foreign residents in order to help prepare the program for foreign tourists. In 2021 the Itoigawa Geopark Council will also meet with local residents of the Kotaki District to discuss conservation and management issues related to the Itoigawa Shimpaku and its native habitat as well as opportunities for increasing tourism in the region through the Itoigawa Shimpaku Project. It is important that these tour programs focus on conservation and the value of enjoying the Itoigawa Shimpaku in its native territory to prevent the loss of further specimen to outside collectors and dealers.

In the coming years, the Itoigawa UNESCO Global Geopark will develop a community led replanting and forestry management program. This program will involve hiking tours in which participants can enjoy hiking in the Kotaki District while learning about forestry management. As part of the tour, participants will help replant Itoigawa Shimpaku seedlings in order to promote regrowth. These tours will also be a valuable tool to promote the Kotaki District as a region for sustainable tourism.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The Itoigawa Shimpaku is a valuable part of Itoigawa UNESCO Global Geopark's cultural heritage with strong links to local geological and natural heritage. Its future is threatened by depopulation and waning interest among



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younger generations, necessitating immediate action. The Itoigawa Shimpaku Project represents a Geopark-led, community-involved effort to preserve and promote the Itoigawa Shimpaku while contributing to the development of responsible tourism and sustainable forestry management.

Continued effort is needed to engage the regional community, especially youth. The involvement of local schools and community centers could be effective in achieving this. Care must also be taken to ensure that trade in the Itoigawa Shimpaku remains sustainable and does not result in the loss of further specimens to export pressure.

