

Aso Living Alongside Nature 2

The Shioisha fountainhead remains dry ever since the earthquake in April. (Minami Aso Village)



Members from the Ikenokubo Bokuya Co-op install steel fences to keep cattle from roaming into the collapsed areas. (Minami Aso Village)

8 MONTHS FROM THE KUMAMOTO EARTHQUAKE

Kumamoto, Japan- The Aso area in Kumamoto prefecture was hit by a string of natural disasters this year: two earthquakes in April, torrential rainfall in June, and the eruption of Mt.Aso in October. The unique and beautiful landscape of Mt. Aso's caldera still bear the deep scars.

PHOTO&TEXT
BY YUKI IWANAMI



Children laugh as they participate in ritual sumo tournament at Shioi Shrine. (Minami Aso Village)



Co-op members establish a fire line before burning off grass. Landslides hamper their efforts. (Aso City)



The mud brought on by the flooding has covered most of the rice seedling. (Minami Aso Village)

The particular landscape is shaped by vast grass fields where the exclusive Akaushi cattle roam, and the *bokuya* fields where their feed is sourced. The fields date back a thousand years, but now show the scars from the earthquake and heavy rains. Mountainsides have collapsed in numerous areas. Water lines for the cattle have stopped and roads leading to the fields have been damaged. In some places, black ash from the eruption can still be found. Some farmers gave up grazing their cattle or canceled burning off the fields, a process crucial for their maintenance. The rebuilding of damaged houses is given priority, so farmers must wait for a full scale recovery effort to begin in the fields.

The Shioisha fountainhead in the Nakamatsu District of Minami Aso Village has remained dry since April. Farmers who relied on it somehow managed to plant rice this year by pumping in water from other sources. But after the planting, another flood swept in and drowned the rice paddies in a coat of mud. The Nagano District in the same village managed to plant only five out of forty hectares.

During the autumn festival in October, the ritual sumo tournament was held at the Shioi Shrine where the fountainhead is found. Due to the circumstances,

there were doubts the annual festival could take place that year. But the villagers decided that they just as well should. The jubilant shouts, from the toddlers to the elderly, rang out through the night at the shrine. "I was getting wary of this. I mean why bother with this sumo thing every year. But this year, I'm mighty happy we can", a man from the volunteer fire company confessed cheerfully.

Though the calamities have calmed down, the residents can't simply move on to recovering. The cracks in the mountainside remain a threat and could start collapsing any time. Living alongside nature, one must always keep in mind the havoc it can sometimes wreak. But you can't keep despairing forever. The villagers have accepted the actions of nature, and do what they can. They delicately maneuver through the collapsed slopes and channel water to their farms. They hop over crevices and prepare to burn off the underbrush. These activities require the cooperation among the community because no one gets compensated for it. That's also why no one has a second thought when asked to contribute. This has always been the way of the people who live along nature.

Translation by Taro Konishi



Nagano Bokuya Co-op members lay a water pipe along the crumbled mountainside. The earthquake destroyed the pipe carrying water from the fountainhead, threatening the lives of cattle. (Minami Aso Village)



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