

The PHOTO JOURNAL

VOL.0015

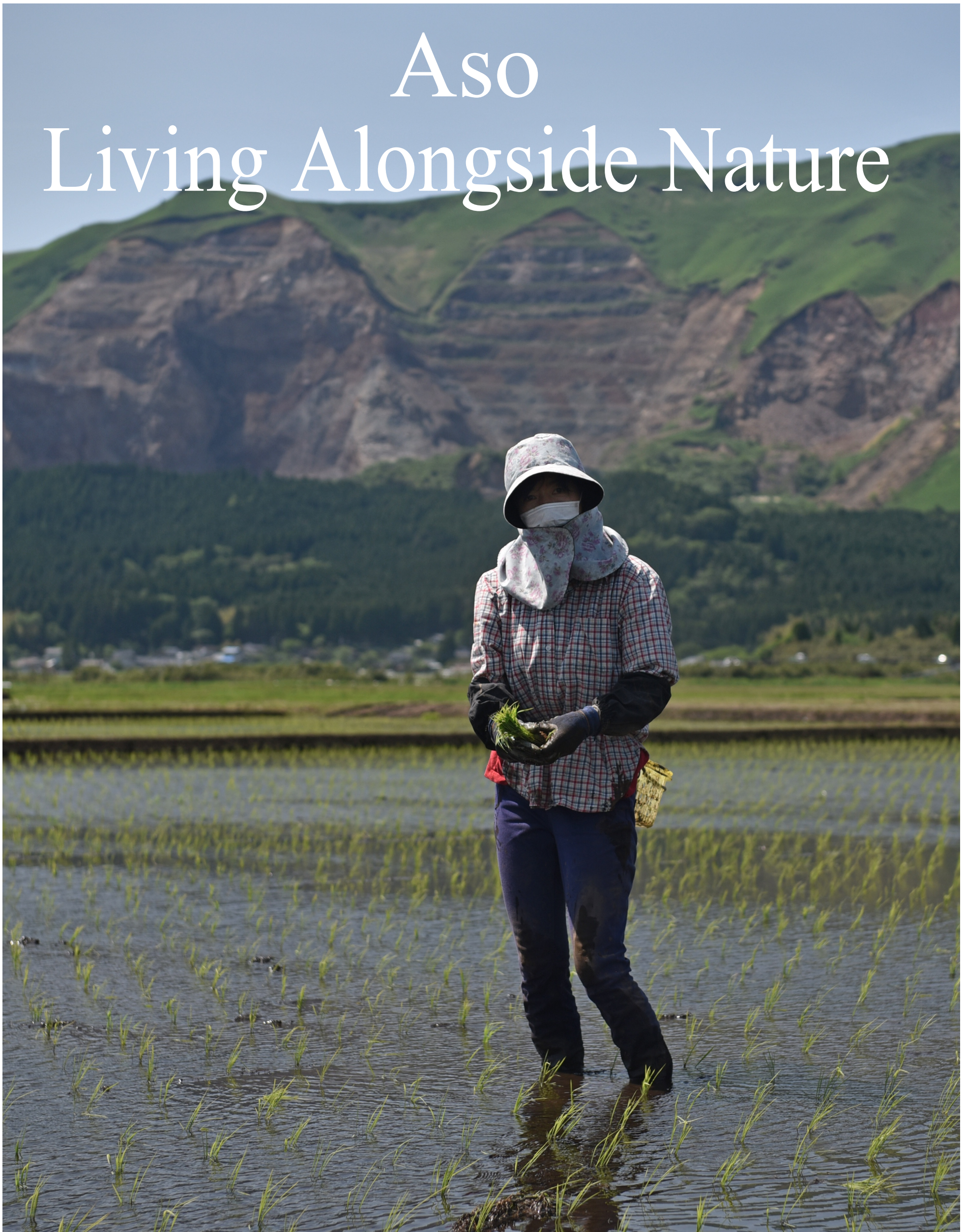
Aug 31, 2016
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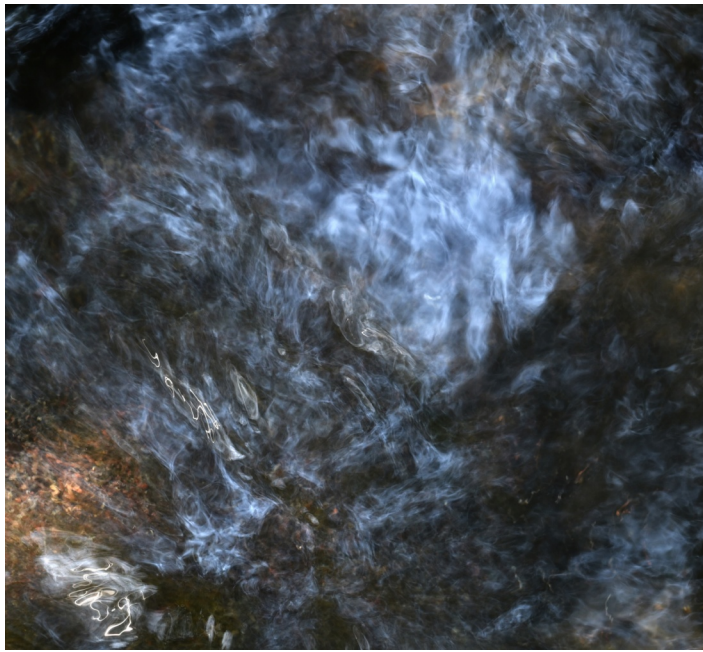
Aso Living Alongside Nature





KUMAMOTO EARTHQUAKE

PHOTO & TEXT
BY
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Water rushes out of one of the numerous springs in former Hokusui Village. The water forms the basis of life in Aso. (Ryohei, Minami Aso Village)

The Shioisha fountainhead dried up after the main tremor on April 16th. Goto reminisced how he caught fish here. (Nakamatsu, Minami Aso Village)

Kumamoto, Japan- From mid-April, Kumamoto Prefecture was rocked by a series of earthquakes, the two strongest tremors on the 14th and 16th measuring 7 on the Japanese earthquake intensity scale.

In Minami Aso Village, the lake next to a Shinto shrine sat empty and dry. The flow of fresh water from the Shioisha fountainhead had suddenly ceased on the 16th. Before merging with two other villages to form Minami Aso Village, the area where the fountainhead is situated was part of the village named Hokusui, literally meaning "white water". Villagers have always relied on it as a source for daily use and to supply water to the rice paddies.

"We used to think that even if an earthquake hit, we would still have water because we were in Hokusui. And as long as we had the water and rice, that things would be OK" says Akihisa Goto who has supported the community as a member of the local volunteer fire brigade.

Kumamoto is a land where fresh water flows abundantly. And that water originates from Aso. Numerous springs overflow with groundwater and the main rivers in Kyushu all originate here. Of over 20 major cities in Japan, Kumamoto City (population 740,000) is the only city where the water supply is completely sourced from groundwater. This water too, comes from Aso.

At Aso Shrine in Aso City, both the front and main shrine collapsed from the tremors. Nakamachi Street, which stretches around the shrine, is also referred to as "Spring Stroll Path" because of the numerous springs spurting fresh water along the route. The residents have long used the water for their daily needs, and the path has also become a tourist attraction after stops were installed with rustic looking waterwheels or carved stones where passersby could take sips of the fresh water. After the earthquake, several of them have dried up too.

Hokusui is situated south of Mount Aso, and with its 11 fountainheads, is referred to as "the land where water is born". The springs are taken for granted and no one imagined them ceasing. May and June is the season to plant rice, but the farmers who rely on the Shioisha fountainhead have been unable to do so by lack of water. Goto describes the scenery of the past years when there were no worries about water. "It's a beautiful sight. When you looked down from the mountain path, the rice paddies looked as if the whole area was covered in mirrors". But not this year. "The rainy season is coming". Almost every resident I talked to mentioned this. People pay a lot of attention to rain around here. The area has been hit by heavy rains numerous times over the years. Evacuation orders were issued as recently as May 10th, just a few days before the earthquakes, and during the Western Japan Flood



Kiyoko Goto (right) and sister-in-law Fumiko Goto have managed to begin planting rice after repairing the cracks in the paddies. The scarred Mt. Yomine, which can be seen in the background, is in danger of further collapse. (Nakamatsu, Minami Aso Village)



Despite planting season, a rice paddy stays dry due to lack of water from the Shioisha fountainhead. (Nakamatsu, Minami Aso Village)



Cracks in the ground and damaged canals have prevented rice planting in many areas of Akamizu, Aso City. Three out of the eight paddies of Katsunori Morita are unusable.

Disaster of 1953 when over a thousand people were killed, an entire village in the Nakamatsu district was wiped away by a landslide from Mt. Yomine which is connected to Mt. Aso and looms over the area. In 2012, severe damage was recorded in the area when northern Kyushu was met with torrential rain.

The earthquake damage in Nakamatsu district was not as severe as others, but the threat of landslides has forced many of the residents to take refuge in the emergency shelters. Parts of the mountain have already crumbled during the earthquakes and filled up the landslide barriers and could cause further large scale collapse. Despite the evacuation order being downgraded to a state of alert in late May making it possible for residents to return home, many choose to stay at the shelters. With the rainy season approaching, some are even prepared to leave their homes again and return to the shelters. Far from investigating the problem at the Shioisha fountainhead, people have yet to regain their peaceful lives and have no idea how long it will stay that way. "The village alone can't do anything. Unless we somehow get help from the prefectural and state level to do something about the mountain, we won't be able to continue on with our lives" says Goto.

The vast farmland around Aso, another blessing of the mountain range, has allowed a thriving livestock industry. Stretching from the crest of Mt. Yomine north to Mt. Eboshi lie pastures where the cattle can graze freely, a key element in producing the high quality Akaushi brand beef. But the instability has endangered that as well. Unlike most mountains in Japan, the Aso range is covered with grass instead of forests. But now, the surface of Mt. Eboshi has deteriorated enough to show the bare brown earth beneath. Dirt and sand has reached the edges of some of the pastures, and parts of the pasture itself have been damaged too. Naoshi Yamato who, raises livestock and also grows rice and vegetables, was met by the earthquake immediately after he set his cattle to graze for the season. Since he thinks it's best for the animals to be able to roam around, he looks warily up at the mountain, unable to call them back down.

For the people of Kumamoto, rain has always been a troublemaker. At the same time, none other than the natural environment including the water of Aso is what let the people thrive here. When the waterworks stopped after the earthquake, long lines of



Shizuo Yamamoto was cutting feed crop. When finished, he plans to double-crop rice here. The paddy canal was damaged by the quake and he worries whether the temporary fix will hold. (Nishihara Village)



With the waterworks disrupted, a woman fetches water from a spring. "The springs are a godsend. I never noticed that we use so much water everyday". (Nakamatsu, Minami Aso Village)

residents waiting to fill up water tanks were formed at the unaffected fountainheads. Kikuko Kinoshita who runs an eatery along Aso City's "Spring Stroll Path" even collected water from her home to deliver to Kumamoto City.

During this spring, farmers have been busy mending the cracks in the paddies and planting seedling while still living in the inconvenient emergency shelters. The farmers whom relied on the Shioisha fountainhead have somehow managed to partially resume planting by funneling rainwater from the mountain to the irrigation channels. "The plants don't care whatever condition we're in" Tomoyuki Yamazaki from Nishihara Village says while planting sweet potato seedlings. He also acknowledges that "Each time it rains we're called on to evacuate, but that same rain is what cultivates the crop".

Despite the hardships it sometimes throws at them, the water from Aso has nurtured the rice and the land has fattened the cattle, sustaining the lives of the habitants. Living alongside nature has always been the way of life here.

Translation by Taro Konishi



Grazing ground was damaged and the slopes of Mt. Eboshi have slid down. Undecided what to do, Naoshi Yamato lets his cattle roam. (Nakamatsu, Minami Aso Village)



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