

Hidden Wonders | Japan's Last Silkworm Farmers

群馬県は、世界遺産・富岡製糸場でも知られる、日本を代表する養蚕の産地です。しかし、その伝統を支える養蚕農家は年々減少しています。そんな中、若い世代が国産繭の伝統を受け継ぎ、新たな未来へつなぐと挑戦を続けています。あなたは、伝統産業を守りながら発展させるためには、どのような取り組みが必要だと思いますか。



1. Article

Read the following article aloud.

Gunma Prefecture remains one of Japan's leading sericulture regions, producing around 40% of the country's cocoons. It is home to Tomioka Silk Mill, a UNESCO World Heritage site.

Hiroo Asai, a farmer in Tomioka City, moved into the home of a former sericulture farmer and now raises silkworms there.

Each year, Asai begins raising silkworms in May. After hatching, they feed continuously on mulberry leaves and begin spinning cocoons after about 25 days. At that point, they are transferred to a rotating cocooning frame (mabushi), a tool lined with small compartments where they spin their cocoons.

Asai raises silkworms five times between spring and autumn, shipping about 800 kilograms of cocoons each year. The cocoons are then sent to a silk-reeling factory, where they are spun into domestically produced raw silk.

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Source: Hidden Wonders | Japan's Last Silkworm Farmers

1. Article

Asai first **encountered** sericulture in his twenties. He was inspired by a mentor during his training who cared for silkworms using all five senses.

Using his entire body, Asai judges their health and stage of development. He listens to the sound of silkworms eating mulberry leaves, observes their body color, feels their firmness, and even smells their urine. Asai says the appeal of sericulture is that "the harder you work, the bigger the cocoons the silkworms produce."

Raw silk, once a major export that supported Japan's economy, entered a period of **decline** after reaching its postwar peak in the 1960s, as domestic producers struggled to compete with lower-priced imports.

The number of sericulture farmers in Japan has continued to fall. According to the Dainippon Silk Foundation, only 113 farms remained as of 2025. About two-thirds of the farmers are aged 70 or older, and most have no successor.

At a forum of silk **industry** stakeholders held in March, participants voiced concerns that Japan's silk industry could disappear within five to 10 years. They called for ways to encourage consumers to choose products made with domestically produced raw silk.

"It's a declining industry, but I also see its **potential**," Asai says. He now accepts trainees hoping to enter sericulture and looks toward the future of the traditional industry. "I want to increase the number of people involved in our production region and ship more high-quality cocoons."

Silkworms once helped make Japan prosperous. Domestically produced raw silk is still used in the Shikinen Sengu, the periodic rebuilding of the shrines and renewal of the sacred garments at Ise Grand Shrine. The silk industry, deeply intertwined with Japanese culture, now faces a critical moment.

2. Key phrases and vocabulary

First repeat after your tutor and then read aloud by yourself.

1. raise 育てる

My aunt and uncle raise chickens on a small family farm.

2. encounter 遭遇する

Holly encountered an old classmate from her university at the train station.

3. decline 衰退

The town saw a decline in its population over many years.

4. industry 産業

The tourism industry creates many jobs in the city.

5. potential 可能性

The young athlete has the potential to become an Olympic champion.

3. Questions

Read the questions aloud and answer them.

1. What percentage of Japan's cocoons are produced in Gunma Prefecture?
2. Why has Japan's raw silk industry declined since the 1960s?
3. What does Asai hope to do for the future of sericulture?
4. Why do you think it is important to protect traditional industries?
5. Would you be interested in learning a traditional skill? Why or why not?

4. 113戸にまで減った養蚕農家、国産繭の伝統を紡ぐ 群馬の若手農家の挑戦

世界遺産「富岡製糸場」がある群馬県は今も、繭の生産量約4割を誇る養蚕の一大産地だ。

富岡市の農家、浅井広大さん（37）は廃業した養蚕農家の住宅に移り住み、蚕を飼育している。

毎年5月に飼育を開始。孵化後、桑の葉を食べ続けた蚕は25日ほどで繭を作るようになる。そのタイミングで「回転族（まぶし）」という「部屋」が並んだ道具に蚕を移動させる。

浅井さんは春から秋にかけ養蚕を5回行い、1年に繭玉約800キロを出荷する。繭はその後、製糸工場で国産の生糸に紡がれる。

浅井さんが養蚕と出会ったのは20代のころ。研修先の「師匠」が五感を駆使して、蚕の世話をする姿に憧れた。

蚕が桑をはむ音を聴く。体色を見る。尿のにおいを嗅ぐ。硬さを感じる。全身で蚕の体調や生育段階を見極める。浅井さんは「頑張った分だけ蚕が大きな繭をつくってくれる」と養蚕の魅力を語る。

浅井さんは1回に約10万頭を育てる。

かつて輸出品として日本経済を支えた生糸。戦後は昭和40年代をピークに、海外産との価格競争などが原因で繭生産量は減少に転じた。

国内の養蚕農家の減少も続く。一般財団法人「大日本蚕糸会」によると、その戸数は令和7年時点で113戸。そのうち70歳以上が3分の2を占め、大半には後継者がいないという。

蚕糸関係者が集まった3月のフォーラムでは「5年、10年で（国内の）蚕糸業が消えるかも」「国産生糸の製品を選んでもらう方策を」などと危機感を共有していた。

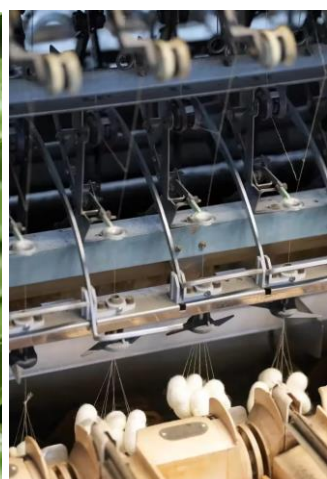
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出典：113戸にまで減った養蚕農家、国産繭の伝統を紡ぐ 群馬の若手農家の挑戦
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4. 113戸にまで減った養蚕農家、国産繭の伝統を紡ぐ 群馬の若手農家の挑戦

「衰退産業だが、同時に可能性も感じる」と浅井さん。今では養蚕を志す研修生も受け入れ、「産地として仲間を増やし、質の良い繭玉を多く出荷していきたい」と伝統産業の未来を見据えている。

かつて国を豊かにしてくれた蚕。社殿や服飾品を新調する伊勢神宮の式年遷宮でも国産生糸が使われる。日本文化と切っても切れない蚕糸業が危機にひんしている。先人たちが築いた伝統をこれからも紡ぎ続けていけるだろうか。



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