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**Revitalizing Regional Landscapes, Redefining Peace:**

***Satoyama*and *Satoumi*as Models for Eco-Relational Justice in Japan**

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**Abstract**

The present article examines how the restoration of traditional landscapes through the practices of *satoyama* (a Japanese term referring to rural areas where humans and nature coexist, fostering biodiversity and cultural heritage) and *satoumi* (a Japanese term describing productive coastal areas that integrate human livelihoods with rich marine ecosystems) in Japan can serve as practical models for an ecological and relational conception of peace. Using an interdisciplinary approach that combines peace studies, ecological justice, and sustainable pedagogies, the article explores local efforts to revitalize the regional landscape after decades of environmental degradation. These efforts include community-led reforestation, sustainable management of water and agricultural resources, and the conservation of native species. The study of *satoyama* and *satoumi* in Japan demonstrates how these practices promote relational justice, extending beyond human conflicts to address the health of soil, water, and biodiversity. Furthermore, these models enable the integration of traditional knowledge and contemporary strategies, challenging dominant extractivist paradigms. It is argued that these initiatives foster ecological regeneration and enhance social cohesion by engaging multiple stakeholders—local governments, communities, and NGOs—in collaborative practices. The cases examined in this research, particularly the one of the *Totoro Furusato Foundation*, provide a concrete foundation for rethinking peace education from a sustainability perspective, bridging local and global dimensions of the ecological crisis.

**Keywords:** *Satoyama*, *satoumi*, ecological and relational peace, social cohesion, *Totoro Furusato Foundation*.

**Introduction**

Scholarly interest in the relationship between environment and peacebuilding has grown in recent years, driven by increasing awareness of the impact of environmental conflicts on social stability and sustainable development. The Japanese concepts of *satoyama* and *satoumi* serve as compelling real-world examples of this dynamic. These traditional approaches to land and coastal management demonstrate how a harmonious relationship between humans and nature can foster both ecological resilience and social cohesion.

*Satoyama* (里山) represents the dynamic landscapes between cultivated land and forested mountains, shaped by centuries of agricultural and forestry practices. Far from being untouched wilderness, these areas embody a careful balance between human livelihood and biodiversity. By maintaining shared responsibility over resources, rural communities have historically mitigated disputes over land use, reinforcing cooperation and social stability. In an era of increasing ecological challenges, *satoyama* principles offer a model for conflict prevention through sustainable stewardship.

While *satoyama* speaks to the land, *satoumi* (里海) extends these principles to the coastal realm, where traditional fishing villages have long practiced a form of marine stewardship that enhances, rather than depletes, ocean biodiversity. By actively managing fish stocks, restoring seagrass beds, and minimizing pollution, these communities ensure both environmental health and economic stability. This localized, cooperative approach contrasts with exploitative resource extraction, offering an alternative path where ecological sustainability and social peace go hand in hand.

The study of these practices is a matter of global interest. Recognizing the value of these traditional models, the *Satoyama Initiative*—launched by UNESCO in 2009—seeks to integrate *satoyama* and *satoumi* principles into broader sustainability efforts worldwide. Similarly, regions such as Japan’s Noto Peninsula and Shiretoko Peninsula have been designated as Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS) by the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), emphasizing their role as living examples of coexistence between humans and nature.

As interest in sustainable practices grows, this article examines how traditional Japanese approaches to managing rural landscapes and coastal areas—*satoyama* and *satoumi*—promote biodiversity and ecosystem productivity through sustainable practices. Far from being isolated techniques, these practices are deeply embedded in Japan’s cultural fabric, influencing land and marine management in ways that reflect broader social values. Here, I contend that their emphasis on balance and coexistence resonates with key principles in peace studies, where harmony is cultivated through collaboration rather than pressed upon through external control.

At the heart of these initiatives lies a Confucian model of social organization, where collective responsibility and mediation take precedence over confrontation. Confucius argued that a well-ordered society functions like a family, bound by reciprocal care rather than rigid authority (Callister and Wall 1997, p. 313). This principle underpins Japan’s environmental stewardship: *satoyama* and *satoumi* are not enforced through top-down regulations but maintained through communal responsibility and long-standing social ties. Conflict, when it arises, is resolved through consensus-building mechanisms that emphasize listening, trust, and moral suasion.

This Confucian logic is reflected in tangible practices. In Shiretoko Peninsula, local fishing cooperatives self-regulate seasonal bans through mutual agreement rather than government mandates. In the Noto Peninsula, the restoration of terraced rice fields depends on intergenerational knowledge transfer, mirroring the Confucian teacher-disciple relationship. These examples illustrate how Japan’s approach to mediation extends beyond social interactions to environmental care, reinforcing the idea that social and ecological harmony are interconnected.

To explore this further, I first analyze *satoyama* and *satoumi* through a cultural lens before introducing the concept of *furusato*, which evokes a deep emotional connection to one’s hometown. I then examine case studies such as the *Totoro Furusato Foundation*, the Noto rice terraces, and Shiretoko’s sustainable fishing practices. As I aim to demonstrate, Japanese community mediation prioritizes understanding and empathy over direct confrontation, relying on information-sharing, active listening, and perspective-taking rather than imposed concessions (Callister and Wall 1997, p. 317). Here, I contend that this community-driven approach has been key to the success of *satoyama* and *satoumi*.

**Beyond conservation: A blueprint for peacebuilding**

*Satoyama* and *satoumi* represent traditional Japanese approaches to land and coastal management that contribute to ecological balance and social cooperation. In particular, *satoyama* historically referred to carefully managed rural landscapes that were integral to Japanese agriculture, providing essential resources such as firewood, fertilizer, and fodder for farming communities in suburban and rural areas. These human-shaped forests were adapted in size to meet the agricultural and family needs of local communities. For example, Japan’s steep terrain and heavy monsoons once made flooding inevitable, but *satoyama* landscapes acted as natural water management systems, regulating flow and protecting downstream urban areas (Hasan 2010, p. 102).

During the late Edo (1603–1868) and Meiji (1868–1912) periods, modernization led to rapid urbanization, large-scale construction, and changing economic priorities. As a result, the widespread adoption of commercial fertilizers reduced reliance on *satoyama*’s natural resources, which led to a decline in the active management of these landscapes (Kobori and Primack 2003, pp. 307–308). Particularly, the post-war economic boom concentrated development in industrial hubs, leading to rural depopulation and the neglect of these once-thriving ecosystems, resulting in many *satoyama* areas either vanishing or becoming semi-wild spaces.

Despite this, and recognizing their crucial role in biodiversity conservation, efforts to sustainably manage and restore *satoyama* landscapes have gained renewed attention in recent years. Today, the concept of *satoyama* has expanded beyond forests to include the entire agricultural ecosystem—rice paddies, waterways, and grasslands—all of which continue to sustain rural livelihoods, highlighting the interconnectedness of human and natural systems in traditional Japanese land management. The *Satoyama Initiative* builds on this foundation, aiming to revitalize these landscapes by integrating local knowledge with modern sustainability strategies. By examining global examples, the *Satoyama Initiative* identifies common principles, encourages collaboration between ecological and agricultural approaches, and develops adaptable frameworks for sustainable management. More than just a conservation effort, it envisions a globally applicable model that balances environmental preservation with cultural and economic resilience (Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity 2009, p. 6).

A key determinant of this initiative is a consensus-driven decision-making process, as it is believed that sustainable resource management is most effective when decisions are made collaboratively, incorporating the perspectives of all stakeholders. By facilitating dialogue among local authorities, environmental groups, businesses, and residents, communities can develop policies that balance economic needs with ecological responsibility. This is largely due to shared governance through councils and zoning regulations, which ensures that development aligns with conservation, promotes environmental awareness, and protects natural resources for future generations while meeting current demands (Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity 2009, p. 7).

To illustrate how this principle is applied in practice, here are two case studies demonstrating *satoyama* and *satoumi* approaches in action:

The Noto Peninsula, located in Ishikawa Prefecture, Japan, is a prime example of how the *satoyama* model has been successfully implemented through cooperation between local communities, government bodies, and environmental organizations. This traditional landscape, consisting of forests, terraced rice fields, and managed grasslands, had been declining due to rural depopulation and urban migration. To reverse this trend, several collaborative decision-making initiatives were introduced (Qiu *et al.* 2014; Ishikawa Prefectural Government 2020):

* Restoration of traditional terraced rice fields: Farmers’ associations, urban volunteers, and local authorities have revitalized rice terrace farming, enhancing biodiversity and helping the recovery of species like the black-eared kite.
* Sustainable forest management: The community has revived traditional forestry practices to prevent land abandonment, promoting reforestation and sustainable firewood harvesting.
* Ecotourism and local craft industries: Rural tourism and traditional crafts such as Wajima-nuri lacquerware and artisan’s sake production are encouraged to generate income while maintaining ecological balance.

Thanks to this multi-stakeholder approach, both biodiversity conservation and economic activities have been successfully sustained in the region.

This collaborative model is not limited to terrestrial landscapes; it also extends to coastal and marine ecosystems under the *satoumi* framework. One such example is found in Shiretoko Peninsula, a UNESCO World Heritage Site located in the northernmost part of Japan, in Hokkaido. The region is known for its rich marine resources, including salmon and king crab, which have been vital to the local economy. However, in the mid-20th century, overfishing led to a sharp decline in these species. To address this issue, fishers, scientists, and policymakers have joined forces to implement sustainable fisheries management and marine conservation strategies (Matsuda *et al.* 2012):

* Marine zoning and seasonal fishing bans: Protected marine areas and fishing moratoriums were introduced through agreements between local fisheries cooperatives to allow fish stocks to recover.
* Collaborative scientific monitoring: Fishers and researchers work together to study climate change impacts and adjust harvesting practices based on marine ecosystem conditions.
* Economic diversification: Beyond fishing, the community has promoted eco-tourism activities, such as guided wildlife tours to observe the Ezo brown bear, encouraging habitat conservation.

Through this participatory *satoumi*-based management, salmon populations have significantly rebounded, ensuring long-term economic stability while preserving marine ecosystems.

While the success of collaborative management in Shiretoko Peninsula demonstrates the effectiveness of the *satoumi* approach, the relationship between human activity and coastal ecosystems is often less immediately visible compared to terrestrial landscapes. As Akimichi (2012, p. 163) notes, whereas *satoyama* visibly reflects human influence on the landscape, *satoumi* appears indistinct, revealing its connection to human activity only upon closer examination. This distinction highlights a broader ecological principle: the visibility of human influence on a landscape does not determine whether it has been shaped by human activity. Even when changes are not immediately apparent, landscapes are often the product of long-term interactions between human intent, culture, and history. In this light, *satoumi* serves as a reminder that human influence extends beyond what is easily observable, reinforcing the idea that ecosystems are not just natural spaces but also socio-ecological constructs.

This idea is consistent with Jackson’s (1984, p. 8) argument that landscapes are “a space deliberately created to speed up or slow down the process of nature.” His perspective suggests that landscapes are not just passive natural environments but spaces actively shaped by human intervention, whether to enhance, regulate, or preserve natural processes. *Satoyama* is an evident example of this, as it functions both as an ecological space and as a cultural and social landscape where human activities—such as agriculture and forestry—are deeply woven into the natural world (Hasan 2010, p. 103).

Understanding this relationship between nature and human influence is key to grasping the broader role of *satoyama* and *satoumi*. *Satoyama* woodlands, for instance, naturally sequester carbon, and their conservation enhances this function while also providing renewable resources like woody biomass, reducing carbon emissions (Yokohari and Bolthouse 2011, p. 211). Similarly, *satoumi* highlights the role of seagrass meadows and oyster reefs as natural carbon sinks that also support biodiversity and local fisheries. The restoration of Zostera seagrass beds along Japan’s coasts has improved water quality, provided nursery habitats for fish, and promoted sedimentation (Kirihara 2013, p. 1)—a process that mirrors the role of well-managed forests in maintaining carbon balance on land. These examples illustrate that ecosystem health is not about rigid control but about recognizing and maintaining the relationships that sustain long-term productivity (Davidson-Hunt and Berkes 2001, p. 80).

However, reducing *satoyama* and *satoumi* to products of human intervention overlooks their deeper cultural and emotional significance. While Jackson’s interpretation frames landscapes as synthetic spaces, Japanese conceptualizations extend beyond functionality. In Japanese, the term *keikan* (景観) refers to modern, man-made landscapes, but as Gehring and Kōshaka (2007, p. 278) highlight, *fūkei* (風景) embodies a deeper connection between nature and culture. Unlike *keikan*, *fūkei* reflects Japan’s traditional landscapes—mountains, rice fields, and sacred sites—that hold personal and collective meaning. *Fūkei* is closely tied to *furusato* (故郷), a term evoking nostalgia, warmth, and a sense of belonging—which I explore further below.

Because of this emotional connection, *satoyama* and *satoumi* are not merely physical environments but lived experiences embedded in Japanese cultural identity. The way people perceive and interact with these landscapes is also shaped by language, which not only describes the environment but influences how communities engage with it. In Japan, the vocabulary surrounding landscapes carries generations of ecological knowledge and principles of sustainable coexistence. Allow me to introduce a linguistic approach that can deepen our understanding of how these two modelsreflect cultural practices that offer valuable insights for building sustainable societies in the future:

The terms *satoyama* and *satoumi* reflect the deep linguistic ties between culture and nature in Japan. These landscapes have long been shaped by human activities that integrate work, festivals, and traditions in harmony with the environment. Through this interaction, people have learned from nature, developed cooperative systems for sustainable resource management, and preserved biodiversity. As Honda and Nakamura explain:

First of all, the Japanese word “*bunka*” [文化] is a translation of the English word “culture.” Culture is a derivative of the word “cultivate.” “Cultivating” activities include involvement and interaction with nature. *Satoyama* and *satoumi* have been created through these activities with nature. Hence, it would be fair to say that *satoyama* and *satoumi*, as well as human activities within them, comprise *satoyama* and *satoumi* culture. Human activities in connection with rice paddies are the most familiar *satoyama* and *satoumi* cultures in Japan (Honda and Nakamura 2012, p. 40).

Incidentally, the character *sato* (里) is no random construction; it merges the radicals *ta* (田, rice paddy) and *tsuchi* (土, soil), a reflection of Japan’s deep-rooted connection to rice cultivation. Additionally, the prevalence of *ta* in Japanese surnames further proves this agricultural heritage (Honda and Nakamura 2012, p. 40). This linguistic and cultural link is reinforced by the *Myōji Hisshō Gimu-rei* (平民苗字必称義務令) edict of 1875, which mandated that all Japanese citizens adopt a surname—an edict that emerged when Japan was still largely agrarian (Tsunekawa 2003, p. 41). After this edict, many commoners, having previously gone without family names, chose surnames that reflected their immediate surroundings, occupations, or local geography. As a result, nature-inspired surnames became widespread, drawing from mountains (*yama* 山), rivers (*kawa* 川), forests (*mori* 森), and fields (*ta* 田) which became not just identifiers but reflections of place, livelihood, and an unspoken reverence for nature.

While Japanese surnames reflect nature’s cultural significance, these agrarian traditions run deeper, shaping rituals, practices, and the collective memory of a modernizing nation. Take the concept of *furusato* (故郷) as an example to understand the deep emotional and ecological ties between people and landscapes. Unlike the English word “home,” *furusato* does not refer to one’s current place of residence but rather to a place of origin—one that is only fully recognized as such once it has been left behind. However, *furusato* is not merely tied to nostalgia; it also carries a future dimension, symbolizing an eventual return, whether as an imagined refuge or a final homecoming after personal achievement (Morrison 2013, p. 2). This cyclical relationship with place—departure and return, separation and reconnection—reveals not just a cultural attachment to land but an underlying ecological bond.

The longing for *furusato* is not solely about human settlements but also about the landscapes that once sustained a way of life. This sentiment aligns with Wilson’s (1984) biophilia hypothesis, which suggests that humans have an innate affinity for the natural world. In Japan, this connection is evident in traditional land-use practices that shape *satoyama* and *satoumi*, where landscapes are not just backdrops to rural life but dynamic environments where human activity and biodiversity thrived in balance. In *satoyama* regions, managed forests provide timber and fuelwood, rice paddies sustain amphibians and waterfowl, and grasslands supply fertilizer, fostering a biodiverse mosaic ecosystem. In a similar manner, *satoumi* areas support seagrass beds, coral reefs, and tidal flats through sustainable fishing and aquaculture, maintaining critical marine habitats.

Predictably, then, the enduring appeal of *furusato* is not just emotional but ecological, as it serves as a reminder that human well-being is intricately linked to the health of the landscapes we leave behind yet feel compelled to return to. That said, while biophilia may be a natural tendency, it is not purely instinctual. Unlike animals, whose behaviors are driven by innate impulses, human connections to nature are influenced by lived experience and education. This implies that *furusato* is more than a place; it is a space where biophilic tendencies are cultivated (and learned) through direct engagement with the land. As Barbiero and Berto (2021, p. 4) argue, biophilia—a term derived from the Greek *bios* (life) and *philia* (love), meaning “love of life”—flourishes through exposure to nature, and without meaningful interaction with landscapes like *satoyama* and *satoumi*, this connection risks being weakened. This reveals the need for immersive environmental education to maintain and reinforce biophilic bonds across generations.

One example of such education is *Mori no Gakkō* (森の学校, Forest School) in Nagano Prefecture, where students participate in hands-on activities such as forest thinning, mushroom gathering, and charcoal-making. These experiences, organized in collaboration with local NPOs like the Nagano Satoyama Trust, not only transmit traditional ecological knowledge but also foster emotional and embodied relationships with the land—precisely the kind of engagement biophilia depends on (Mori no Gakkō n.d.).

The 20 Indicators of Resilience in Socio-Ecological Production Landscapes and Seascapes (SEPLS) offer a framework for fomenting such connections while strengthening resilience in ecological, agricultural, cultural, and socio-economic systems. These indicators, developed through community observations and experiences, emphasize adaptability, sustainable biodiversity use, and collaborative innovation (International Partnership for the Satoyama Initiative 2024). Distinct from rigid policy tools, these indicators provide accessible and community-driven strategies that serve several important functions: they help assess resilience by tracking the health of landscapes and the stability of socio-ecological systems, guiding communities in identifying areas that need attention. Based on these assessments, communities can develop strategies to improve sustainability efforts, prioritize urgent issues, and adapt to changing conditions. This process encourages knowledge exchange, facilitating collaboration among communities by providing a shared platform for discussing challenges and solutions (Secretariat of the Satoyama Initiative 2015).

Ultimately, this framework aims to empower communities, strengthening their role in decision-making and adaptive management, ensuring that those most affected by environmental changes have a say in how to respond—arguably the most crucial aspect of this ecological participatory journey. This is because the way humans engage with landscapes—whether through *furusato* nostalgia, biophilic tendencies, or structured resilience frameworks—shapes perceptions of security and stability. Human security is, indeed, deeply connected to environmental conditions, as disruptions in ecosystems can threaten fundamental needs and rights, influencing dynamics of peace and conflict (Ide *et al.* 2023, p. 6).

**Security, peace, and the socio-ecological balance of *satoyama* and *satoumi***

Understanding security through an ecological lens requires moving beyond conventional, state-centric definitions. Peace is not merely the absence of war but a condition actively cultivated through ecological and social harmony. Johan Galtung (1969) differentiates between negative peace—the mere absence of direct violence—and positive peace, which ensures long-term stability through justice, sustainability, and social cohesion. In this context, *satoyama* and *satoumi* exemplify positive peace by promoting sustainable resource management, reducing socio-ecological tensions, and ensuring equitable access to natural wealth.

More fundamentally, these landscapes function as socio-ecological contracts, reinforcing cooperation and resilience across generations. Specifically, they align with Galtung’s four core pillars, providing a comprehensive framework for peace:

* Survival (access to food, water, and shelter).
* Welfare (health and a clean environment).
* Identity (cultural belonging and tradition).
* Freedom (autonomy and participation in decision-making).

By maintaining biodiversity and ecological balance, *satoyama* and *satoumi* ensure survival and welfare. At the same time, they preserve cultural heritage through traditional knowledge and participatory governance, reinforcing identity and freedom. However, what truly defines these landscapes is not just sustainability but socio-ecological resilience—the ability of human-environment systems to adapt and transform in response to change while maintaining their core functions (Folke et al. 2016).

Unlike static conservation models that seek to preserve landscapes as untouched relics, *satoyama* and *satoumi* are dynamic, evolving systems that reflect the shifting relationship between human societies and nature. As Yokohari and Bolthouse (2011, p. 215) emphasize, these landscapes are not “fossils” of the past but living environments where adaptation and reciprocity shape long-term sustainability. This adaptability aligns with the idea of active peace, which is cultivated not through isolation or rigid control but through continuous interaction, learning, and cooperation. In this regard, instead of viewing sustainability as the mere prolongation of existing conditions, these systems frame it as an ongoing negotiation with time itself. This means that landscapes are not only preserved but actively reinterpreted with each generation.

The *Totoro Furusato Foundation* (トトロの故郷と基金委員会, Totoro’s Hometown Foundation) is an excellent example of this philosophy in action.

**The *Totoro Furusato Foundation*: A model of participatory conservation**

The successful implementation of the *Totoro Furusato Foundation* in Japan illustrates how grassroots environmental efforts can foster both ecological sustainability and social resilience. Located in the Sayama Hills, near Tokyo, this initiative does not rely solely on top-down policies but thrives through participatory engagement. This approach aligns with Lederach’s (1997) concept of peacebuilding from below, which argues that sustainable peace emerges from local initiatives rather than being enforced by state institutions. Scholars have termed the integration of top-down and bottom-up approaches hybrid peace, recognizing it as the most effective model for conflict resolution and sustainable governance (Verheij 2021, p. 7).

Beyond conservation, the *Totoro Furusato Foundation* promotes hybrid peace by strengthening community bonds, ensuring environmental justice, and reinforcing intergenerational stewardship. This approach reflects restorative environmentalism (Conca and Dabelko 2002), where ecological cooperation acts as a mechanism for peacebuilding by bringing diverse actors together toward a shared goal. By mitigating socio-ecological tensions and ensuring equitable access to resources, the *Totoro Furusato Foundation* exemplifies this principle through six main activities (Totoro no Furusato Foundation n.d.):

* National trust activities: Acquiring land to protect it from development. As of April 2022, the foundation has secured 57 plots totaling approximately 108,279 square meters, collectively known as *Totoro no Mori* (トトロの森, Totoro’s Forest).
* Fundraising and community engagement: Encouraging donations to purchase land for *satoyama* conservation, with significant contributions from young donors.
* Restoration work: Volunteers and local farmers collaborate to rehabilitate paddy fields, reservoirs, and forests, allowing urban participants to reconnect with traditional agricultural practices.
* Research and documentation: Citizens and researchers monitor endangered species and cultural heritage to support conservation efforts.
* Environmental education: Offering educational programs in schools, seminars for teachers, and hands-on activities in the Sayama Hills, and organizing guided tours, wildlife watching, and seasonal harvest events to deepen children’s connection to nature and tradition.
* Public awareness: Publishing newsletters, managing a website, and organizing events like *Totoro no Furusato Osouji* (トトロの故郷お掃除, Totoro’s Hometown Cleanup) to educate the public about the area’s ecological and cultural significance.

Crucially, this ecological initiative embodies Ostrom’s (1990) principle of common-pool resource management, demonstrating that local communities are often best equipped to sustain shared landscapes. In distinction to rigid top-down conservation policies that can alienate local populations, its decentralized approach guarantees long-term sustainability by aligning ecological care with cultural identity and economic livelihoods. Echoing Saunders (2014, p. 636), it can be argued that while conservation projects often rely on government and NGO mediation, true resilience emerges when communities actively shape the rules governing their own resources. The *Totoro Furusato Foundation*, led by volunteers, researchers, and farmers, exemplifies this bottom-up governance model, proving that strong local engagement leads to more resilient environmental management systems.

Easily discernible, the *Totoro Furusato Foundation* demonstrates that conservation, when driven by local communities, is not just about protecting landscapes—it is about reclaiming agency over shared resources (Kobori and Primack 2003, p. 310). This challenges the assumption that centralized environmental governance is the most effective approach. Instead, it reveals that community-led conservation fosters adaptive, enduring systems that integrate ecological restoration with social cohesion, cultural continuity, and economic stability.

Moreover, this model suggests that peacebuilding and environmental restoration are not separate endeavors but deeply interconnected. Environmental degradation often exacerbates social instability, but the inverse is also true—when communities have a stake in their ecosystems, they foster stability through cooperation rather than conflict over dwindling resources. As opposed to conventional environmental peacebuilding frameworks that prioritize conflict mitigation, the *Totoro Furusato Foundation* demonstrates that proactive community empowerment is the key to long-term sustainability. By making conservation an inclusive, participatory process, the foundation not only preserves biodiversity but actively prevents the conditions that lead to environmental and social crises.

In this sense, as exemplified by this particular case, *satoyama*—and *satoumi*—offers a compelling vision for sustainability—one that does not treat nature as an external entity to be protected but as an integral part of human society. Its success lies in balancing ecological health with social and economic well-being, proving that conservation is most effective when it emerges organically from the communities that depend on and shape these landscapes.

**Animating peace: Miyazaki’s ecology as a model for peace**

Naming the *Totoro Furusato Foundation* after *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988) is more than a tribute to a cultural icon; it reflects the film’s deep environmental and peace-oriented themes. In essence, Miyazaki’s works are not merely about conservation; they propose a vision of peace where human well-being and ecological health are inseparable. His narratives challenge the dichotomy between nature and civilization, instead portraying landscapes as spaces of memory, resilience, and reconciliation. In this particular story, the focus is on sisters Satsuki and Mei, who move to the countryside, where their bond with the forest spirit Totoro helps them cope with their mother’s illness.

In *My Neighbor Totoro*, the *satoyama* is not a mere scenic backdrop; rather, it is a living, breathing entity that nurtures both the characters and the audience’s understanding of coexistence. The film captures the concept of ecosophy, which refers to the ways individuals engage with one another and the environment through an understanding of sustainable practices (Cavalcante 2018, p. 26). It highlights that the restoration of peace goes beyond ending violence—it is about healing the relationships between people, their history, and the land they inhabit. The evolving relationship between Satsuki, Mei and their new rural surroundings illustrates this interconnected healing process. Satsuki and Mei’s ability to see and interact with Totoro symbolizes an uncorrupted perspective, one that has not yet been severed from nature by industrial modernity—in contrast with the loss of connection seen in Miyazaki’s other works, such as *Princess Mononoke* (1997), which often leads to ecological and social crises.

Initially unsettled by the move, the sisters gradually rebuild their sense of stability through their interactions with *satoyama* and its guardian spirit, Totoro. Their growing bond with nature parallels the emotional mending of their family as they navigate their mother’s illness, highlighting how ecological restoration and social resilience are deeply intertwined. Just as *satoyama* requires care and continuity, so too do human relationships, suggesting that peace is cultivated not through isolation or domination, but through attentive, reciprocal engagement with both the environment and one another. In this way, Totoro is not just a symbol of nature; he becomes a guardian of ecological peace, reminding us that sustainability is not only about protecting biodiversity but about preserving the cultural and emotional landscapes that sustain human relationships with the natural world.

Interestingly, and in contrast to conventional depictions of nature spirits as either benevolent protectors or forces of retribution, Totoro is neither. Instead, he is a figure that does not dictate balance but responds to it, appearing only when the human-nature relationship is in flux. His presence reflects an essential truth about *satoyama* and *satoumi*: peace is not the absence of disturbance but the ability to navigate change without collapse. Seen this way, Totoro does not enforce harmony but facilitates the unspoken negotiations between human and non-human worlds. His silence is significant; instead of delivering wisdom or intervening with force, Totoro embodies *wa* (和)—term defined not as a static harmony, but as a fluid state of coexistence that requires continuous adjustment. Peace, in this sense, is not an imposed ideal but an ability to move with, rather than against, through trust, adaptation, and silent understanding.

**Conclusions**

The gradual transformation of Japan’s traditional landscapes due to economic, technological, and demographic shifts poses a critical challenge not only for conservation but also for social stability. The abandonment of rural lands, habitat fragmentation, and urban expansion all signal a weakening of the long-standing relationship between communities and their environment. Yet, initiatives like the *Totoro Furusato Foundation* and broader *satoyama* and *satoumi* models remind us that environmental preservation is not just an ecological concern, but a peacebuilding strategy.

*Satoyama* and *satoumi* embody a form of peace rooted in reciprocity, where human and ecological well-being are mutually reinforcing. Contrary to conventional peace models that focus solely on the absence of violence, these landscapes illustrate that sustainable coexistence between people and nature is fundamental to long-term stability. When environmental degradation fuels social tensions, resource scarcity, and displacement, the principles embedded in *satoyama* and *satoumi* offer a compelling alternative: a world where peace is cultivated not through control or avoidance of conflict, but through active stewardship, shared responsibility, and intergenerational resilience.

The *satoyama* and *satoumi* systems promote relational justice by embedding fairness into ecological interdependence rather than relying on static human frameworks. Justice emerges not through abstract principles but through adaptive reciprocity or, in other words, a continuous negotiation between human practices and environmental responses. This dynamic allows for accountability, as individuals must adjust their actions to maintain balance, not just socially but ecologically. By making justice a lived, responsive process rather than a fixed structure, these systems ensure that fairness is not imposed but naturally sustained through the very logic of coexistence. In this sense, these practices are more than conservation efforts. They are living blueprints for peace, demonstrating that true stability lies in the delicate balance between land, sea, and community.

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