“The Most Beautiful Valley in Japan”: Kamikōchi, the Japan Alps, and National Parks in Japan

Tom Jones

Summary

Kamikōchi valley is the southern gateway to the Chubu Sangaku, which in 1934 was one of the first areas in Japan to be designated a national park. Known as the “Japan Alps,” the area is held in great affection today by climbers and sightseers alike, but was unknown prior to a 1927 newspaper poll that catalogued eight archetypal “Japanese” landscapes. Beyond commemorating the transition from Taishō to Shōwa eras, Kamikōchi’s swift rise symbolized a shift in landscape appreciation towards “modern” (i.e., Western) aesthetics and grand scenery accessible to the public. Grand, mountainous landscapes such as Kamikōchi formed the basis of the inaugural national park law passed in 1931.

Site	Prefecture	Category
Muroto	Kochi	Bayside
Towada	Aomori/Akita	Lake
Unzen	Nagasaki	Mountain
Kiso	Aichi	River
Kamikochi	Nagano	Valley
Kegon Falls	Tochigi	Waterfalls
Beppu	Oita	Hot spring
Karikachi	Hokkaido	Meadow

※ Mount Fuji was exempt as an automatic selection

The final *hakkei* list of selected landscapes in 1927

Graphic produced by Tom Jones.

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昭和二年七月六日 (刊日)
大阪毎日新聞
日本八景
日本二十五勝、日本百景
審査委員會で選定の結果
今春來本社主催、鐵道省後援の下に募集した日本八景選定は滿天下の熱狂を以て迎へられ、實に空前の大盛況裏にその投票を終り、引つゞき審査委員會を開き、極めて嚴密公正なる審査をなしたる結果、いよ〳〵左の如く八景、二十五勝ならびに百景を選定された、しかして今日こゝにこれを發表することを得たのは本社の深く欣幸とするところである
「新」の字を除く

Newspaper clippings from 1927 record Kamikochi's triumph in the "valley" category

Osaka Mainichi Shinbun "Nihon Hakkei" (6 July 1927), p.1.

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Located at 1,500 m above sea level, the alpine valley Kamikōchi houses the headwater of the Azusa River. On either side, steep ravines rise to peaks of 3,000 m. This is the southern gateway to the Chubu Sangaku—the "Japan Alps." Today it ranks among Japan's ten most-visited national parks, with annual visitors peaking at 2.2 million in 1991, and is held in great affection today by climbers and sightseers alike.

And yet the valley was virtually unknown prior to 1927, when it was listed in a poll about Japanese landscapes. Conducted by two newspaper companies and backed by the Railways Ministry, the poll sought to determine Japan's representative landscapes in eight categories, using a *hakkei* (八景) canon based on ancient Confucian cosmology. The first stage of the selection process consisted of a shortlist compiled from 93.5 million postcard votes by the general public. Next, a panel of experts deliberated for over 13 hours before the final list was published. Even though Kamikōchi had ranked a distant eleventh in the postcard vote, a powerful collection of elite interest groups helped it gain nomination in the final *hakkei.*

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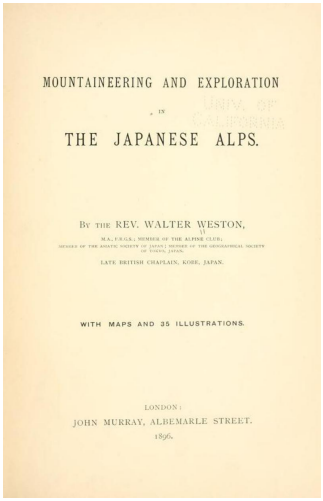
Newspaper clippings from 1927 record Kamikochi's triumph in the "valley" category

Osaka Mainichi Shinbun "Nihon Hakkei" (6 July 1927), p.1.

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The 1927 *hakkei* marked the coronation of the new emperor Shōwa, heralding a new era that departed from static *meisho* (名所) traditions of fixed sightseeing circuits that centered on coastal vistas, shrines, and temples of literary fame. Unlike sacred mountains such as Hakusan or Tateyama, Kamikōchi was not renowned as a pilgrimage site. Kamikōchi's swift rise symbolized a shift in landscape appreciation towards "modern" (i.e., Western) aesthetics and grand scenery accessible to the public. Among its most ardent advocates was Kojima Usui, a Yokohama banker who personified a new generation of wealthy climbers that envisaged Kamikōchi as the base for the new sport of alpinism. Kojima's promotion of the valley as an "untouched wilderness" drew on a *terra nullius* rationale that exaggerated its remoteness. Influential foreigners such as Walter Weston helped forge this new culture into social networks such as the Japan Alpine Club (est. 1905), while alpinism (アルピニズム) also gelled with literary works such as Shiga Shigetaka's *Nihon Fukeiron* (1894), an imperialistic travelogue.

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MOUNTAINEERING AND EXPLORATION

IN

THE JAPANESE ALPS.

By the REV. WALTER WESTON,

M.A., F.R.G.S.; MEMBER OF THE ALPINE CLUB;

HONORARY MEMBER OF THE ASIATIC SOCIETY OF JAPAN; MEMBER OF THE GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY OF TOKYO, JAPAN;

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1896.

Weston's book (published in 1896) helped pave the way for Japanese alpinism

Weston, Walter, *Mountaineering and exploration in the Japanese Alps.* London: J. Murray, 1896, iii.

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Walter Weston (right) with local guides Kamijo Kamonji (left) and Nemoto Seizou (center)

Weston, Walter, *The Playground of the Far East.* London: J. Murray, 1918, 164.
Photograph by Walter Weston.

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An eruption of Mount Yake

Courtesy of Matsumoto City Museum.

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But the alpinists' vision for Kamikōchi was just one of many planned developments, including livestock grazing, rice farming, and hydroelectric power generation. The balance tipped in favor of hydro after the eruption of Yakedake in 1915 when volcanic rubble blocked the Azusa, creating a natural levee. Extensive surveys re-emphasized the potential of hydroelectric power, but conservationists secured the valley's designation as a forest reserve (1916) and national monument (1919). Nonetheless, legal protection did not safeguard the valley's future and the Kama Tunnel was completed in 1924, enabling vehicle access to facilitate the construction of the Kasumizawa dam. However, the concurrent Keihin Denryoku development plan to create a large-scale dam by flooding the valley galvanized an unlikely conservation alliance of aristocrats, academics, mountaineers, and bureaucrats. Powerful planners and landscape architects such as Tamura Tsuyoshi insisted tourism was the only feasible alternative to hydropower, and media campaigns such as the *hakkei* thus became an important PR tool to educate the public about opportunities to explore Japan's 'new' landscapes.

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The Imperial Kamikochi Hotel, completed in 1933 with the help of funding from the Ministry of Finance

Courtesy of the Imperial Hotel.

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Tourism helped raise awareness of Kamikōchi's plight and rally support against the construction of large-scale hydropower dams, as had occurred at Kurobe further north in the same mountain range. The pragmatic campaigning tactics that sealed Kamikōchi's *hakkei* nomination would subsequently be scaled up to mobilize a cross-section of stakeholders into creating the inaugural national park law (1931). Grand, mountainous landscapes such as Kamikōchi formed an integral part of the new tourism-based national park system. Infrastructure development was promoted along the lines of the 'Yellowstone model,' and 'international standard' hotels were constructed, funded by low-interest, long-term loans from the Finance Ministry. By the time the Japan Alps was designated among the first batch of national parks in 1934, visitors could stay in the Kamikōchi Imperial Hotel, a luxurious Swiss-style lodge, and a regular bus service was also in operation to the 'most beautiful valley in Japan'.

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Kama Tunnel was completed in 1924; a bus service began in 1933

Courtesy of Matsumoto City Museum.

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Further readings:

- Jones, Thomas. "The Role of the Shin Nihon Hakkei in Redrawing Japanese Attitudes to Landscape." In *Environment, Modernization and Development in East Asia*, edited by T.-J. Liu, and J. Beattie, 139-56. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016.
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- Wigen, Kären. "Discovering the Japanese Alps: Meiji Mountaineering and the Quest for Geographical Enlightenment." *Journal of Japanese Studies* 31, no. 1 (2005): 1-26.

Related links:

- The History and People of Kamikochi (Kamikochi Visitor Center website) https://www.kamikochi-vc.or.jp/en/learn/history/index.html
- Sacred Highland Kamikochi (website by international Kamikochi enthusiasts) http://www.kamikochi.org/

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About the author:

Tom Jones
Tom Jones is an Environmental Policy lecturer at Meiji University's Graduate School of Governance Studies in Tokyo, Japan. Originally from the UK, Jones relocated to Japan to specialize in Forest Science, completing a PhD at Tokyo University in 2010. He was then employed as a researcher at a regional NGO, carrying out fieldwork for Matsumoto City in the Japan Alps National Park. His research revolves around social science approaches to visitor management, with a focus on heritage sites and protected areas. His publications are mostly related to contemporary issues related to nature-based tourism, place branding, and regional revitalization. However, this article on Kamikōchi is based on his chapter in a forthcoming book *Environment, Modernization and Development in East Asia: Perspectives from Environmental History,* edited by Ts'ui-jung Liu, and James Beattie. New York/Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.