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## MEDIA RELEASE

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# Climate change hits Japan's natural icons

Two of Japan's most famous natural icons - the cherry trees and its ancient beech forests, are under threat from climate change. Left unattended, beech forests, which are thousands of years old, are unlikely to survive beyond the end of this century, and cherry trees no longer flower in spring.

Temperatures in Japan have already risen more than the world average and they are predicted to rise by around 5°C (to between 3.5°C - 6.4 °C), if the current trajectory of warming does not change. Japan is already experiencing accelerating extreme weather events such as extremely hot summer days and floods which threaten the lives of not only people but also of the country's most important natural icons, the cherry trees and the beech forest.

The Shirakami Mountain beech forests – a World Heritage Site in northern Japan - are known as the spiritual home of the animation film “*Princess Mononoke*.” They are projected to decrease by a staggering 80% by the end of this century if no action is taken to change the course.

Mr. Mitsuharu Kudo, who has lived in the beech forests for more than 50 years as *matagi* [1] says he can't believe that there is a chance the beech forests will die out within decades. “I would argue that we share the responsibility to pass down this precious treasure, which has been passed on for 8000 years, to future generations. Beech forests are the nurturing mother of vegetation, animals and fertile sea. Adaptation would be difficult even if we keep the temperature rise below 2°C. But if we don't, then the spiritual forests face extinction.”

Another important Japanese icon - cherry blossoms – which is reflected in many cultural, traditional and artistic aspects of Japanese life, will flower 14 days earlier if the current trajectory of warming does not change.

Usually, the cherry trees blossom in April, when Japanese schools start their school year and governments and businesses start their new financial years. This is also the period of spring rooted in the culture of Japan, through its ancient culture, songs, poetry and tradition. “And so the cherry blossoms symbolise “*a new beginning*”. If they flower two weeks earlier than usual, it would symbolise *the end*, rather than the beginning and this would completely change the way Japanese people see cherry blossoms,” says Mr Tsunenari Tokugawa, chairman of WWF Japan, and the 18<sup>th</sup> head of the Tokugawa Shogun family [2].



Mr Tokugawa adds, “Soon we face losing our beloved culture closely connected to nature, which we have cherished for thousands of years, if we fail to mitigate the warming of the climate. Where have we lost the spirit of the Edo era [2], where we valued the culture of frugality, passed down in Japan for hundreds of years? We should be using our precious resources and energy more effectively - to create warm relationships between people and to allow children to grow up in contact with nature.”

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#### Notes for Editors

1. The *matagi* are traditional winter hunters from northern Japan, most famously today in the Shirakami-Sanchi forest between Akita and Aomori. They hunt deer and bear. They live in small hamlets of the mountain beech forests of Tōhoku and engage in agriculture during the planting and harvest season. In the winter and early spring, they form hunting bands that spend weeks at a time in the forest. They are known to have traditional belief of worshipping the gifts of nature.
2. The *Edo era* is the period between 1603 and 1868 in the history of Japan when Japanese society was under the rule of the *Tokugawa Shogunate*. The period was characterised by economic growth and environmental protection policies and popular enjoyment of arts and culture.
3. In the currently preserved areas, an estimated 80% of the forests would vanish if conditions do not change. In the Western- and Pacific-coastal areas of Japan, the beech forests would face extinction. (Source: *Japanese Ministry of the Environment*).
4. Cherry trees have blossomed an average of 4.2 days earlier than usual during the last 50 years, and predictions are that they will bloom a further 14.5 earlier by the end of this century. (Source: *Japan Meteorological Agency, and Japanese Ministry of the Environment*).
5. Press release in Japanese: <http://www.wwf.or.jp/activities/2014/03/1193126.html>
6. Link to audio recording of climate witnesses (English only) <http://www.ustream.tv/recorded/45368385>
7. Link to high-res photos <https://www.dropbox.com/sh/cse872des1hx05v/9sF6owTf6w>
8. Background to climate [http://www.wwf.or.jp/activities/files/20140325Shirakami\\_Sakura\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.wwf.or.jp/activities/files/20140325Shirakami_Sakura_ENG.pdf)

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