

The Ecological and Cultural Aspects of Local Foodways in Ulleung Island

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Ulleung Island is located in the middle of the East Sea and the seventh-largest island (72.94 square kilometers) of Korea, with a population of around 9,000 (as of July 2021). It is only accessible by taking a ferry, which takes about three hours from the peninsula. It makes the island isolated, and the island has unique social, ecological, and biocultural systems like those of the Galapagos Islands. These systems link people to their environment at the intersection of nature and culture.

Ulleung Island's environment, both climate and soil, make it difficult to grow rice, a staple food of Koreans. Historically, most early immigrants of the island were farmers, and they avoided fishing. In addition to this, the deep water around the island makes fishing and collecting activities difficult. Under the circumstance, people on the island developed knowledge of native plants and skills of using them. People survived by using those native plants as famine foods. As a result, the typical local food system and the distinctive seasonal cycle of living accommodate this environment has created.

Then, in an era of accelerating social and environmental change, Ulleung Island has led to both threats and advantages to the local food culture. The development of logistics and transportation influenced the island's local food culture culturally and economically. Native plants used as famine foods before have now become a major source of income for the residents. Those famine foods have become unique side dishes and enriching local food. It is a nationwide well-known local specialty now and a symbol to reaffirm the identity of the Ulleung Island community.

The most representative case would be Ulleungdo *myeongi-namul*, also called mountain garlic. Today, the island is well known for its pickled leaves (*jangajji*). Meanwhile, only stems were used to cook, supplying an insufficient amount of rice historically. It changed to the current form after the island's food situation got better and a storage method using soy sauce was introduced. After eating it with Korean pork belly barbeque got so popular, it rapidly commercialized. This commercialization and new storage methods of food affected the agricultural system of the island, as well. Few major native plants were chosen and began to be grown professionally. Farming native plants account for more than 85 percent of agricultural income. Since native plants are wild vegetables, people developed farming methods embodying similar environmental conditions as nature. Eventually, it used to contribute to the protection of the ecosystem. However, the rest of unselected plants faced the threat of survival due to climate change and the recent construction boom on the island.

Recently, interest in local food culture as intangible cultural heritage is increasing on Ulleung Island. Along with protecting the ecological environment, the effort to safeguard its local food culture and raise awareness of its importance and value is underway.

Ulleung Island faces a rapid increase in tourists and upcoming airport construction will boost tourism even more. These will bring unpredictable impacts on local food culture and the distinctive ecosystem. Therefore, it will be a high and appropriate time to look closely at the foodways in Ulleung Island and how the Ulleung community involves in the local food system, both in production and consumption.