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**TITLE**

Not Knowing their Treasure: Tatami Endangered in Japan and Adapted in Europe

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**ABSTRACT**

Traditional Japanese tatami, 6x3 feet rectangular mats featuring a compressed rice straw core covered with woven rush, have been highly regarded by European visitors from the 16th to the 20th centuries for their beauty and cleanliness. Initially, many Europeans found sitting or sleeping on tatami mats uncomfortable. However, owing to its biodegradable and vegan materials, an increasing number now choose tatami for practical reasons such as health benefits, space-saving in densely populated cities, and sustainability.

A survey conducted with over 900 non-Japanese individuals (439 in 2020 and 463 in 2023), and interviews with users and vendors in cities like Barcelona (2022) and Torino, Rome, Bologna, and Paris (2023), revealed that European tatami buyers and sellers highly value natural and organic materials. They appreciate the scent, texture, and sustainability. Authentic natural tatami can last for centuries with proper surface replacement – a maintenance practice unfamiliar to many European users and vendors.

There is a growing international demand for high-quality, made-in-Japan tatami; however, the supply is currently

inadequate. Tatami rooms have become less common in modern Japanese homes, and the number of material producers has drastically decreased from over 10,000 in 1972 to only 260 by 2025. Consequently, most tatami sold in Europe is manufactured in China, but this supply may soon diminish due to high labour costs and low profitability. Without intervention, tatami could disappear from the market.

In Japan, domestic demand for tatami has declined since the 1970s, coinciding with the rise of concrete housing. Despite its proven antibacterial and insect-repelling properties, misinformation regarding mould and pests has contributed to this decline. The shift towards artificial tatami-like mats is also notable: currently, only 10% of Japanese tatami uses traditional rice straw and Japanese rush; the majority is made from polystyrene foam, synthetic rush made from plastic or coated paper, or Chinese rush. There is potential for international trade to help bridge this supply-demand gap. Educating users on the practical value of traditional materials and craftsmanship is also imperative.