

Lake Saiko: The Maidenly Lake

Lake Saiko is known as the “maidenly lake” (*otome no mizuumi*). The water is clear and still, and 70 meters deep in places. Saiko is a remnant of the Senoumi, an ancient body of water all but filled by lava from the Jogan Eruption of 864. Some historians believe that the “Sai” of its name comes from the “Se” of Senoumi.

The same eruption created the ground beneath the Aokigahara Jukai Forest. The lake’s northwestern shore offers sweeping views of this dense “Sea of Trees” across the cool, placid waters of the lake, with Mt. Fuji rising above the treetops. Saiko is convenient to Mt. Junigatake and Mt. Settogatake to the north, where hiking trails offer more panoramic vistas from higher vantage points.

Return of the *Kunimasu*

In recent years, Saiko has been the center of efforts to preserve the *kunimasu*, a kind of sockeye salmon also known as the black kokanee. In 1935, thousands of *kunimasu* eggs were transferred to Lake Saiko from Lake Tazawa in the northern prefecture of Akita, the fish’s only known habitat at the time. The attempt to create a new *kunimasu* population seemed to fail, and was soon forgotten. By 1948, the fish population had died out in Lake Tazawa due to pH changes related to a new hydroelectric dam.

In 2010, however, the discovery of *kunimasu* in Lake Saiko, shocked the scientific world. The lake turned out to have been an ideal habitat for the fish, which prefers to reproduce in the coldest depths. Scientists later found that locals had been catching *kunimasu* regularly over the decades, only to throw them back because they were not as tasty as the regular kokanee (*himemasu*) found in the lake. No one, it seems, had ever told these fishermen that the fish was thought to be extinct.