

Overview of the Ogasawara Islands

The Ogasawara or Bonin Islands comprise about 30 volcanic islands located approximately 1,000 kilometers south of Tokyo. The islands are geographically isolated and home to many endemic species, and the surrounding blue waters are a paradise for whales, dolphins, and green sea turtles. In 1972, the Ogasawara Islands were made into a National Park, and in 2011 they were designated a UNESCO World Natural Heritage Site.

The Ogasawara Islands are a nature lover's dream: trails run through the forests of Chichijima and Hahajima, the two main islands, and around nearly every bend there are views of the beaches where green sea turtles come ashore to lay eggs during the summer. Humpback whales breach off the coasts, and sperm whales flash their flukes as they dive. Indigenous birds flit through the woods, and fruit bats take to the sky at night.

During their long history, the islands have been settled by many different groups, each of which brought its own customs and influences to create a unique cultural mosaic. The islands were first settled by a group of Americans, Europeans, and Polynesians, who arrived in 1830 to create a trading post for the numerous whaling ships who operated in the Pacific Ocean. They were later joined by Japanese settlers. The particular blend of language and customs that developed among this mix of peoples can be found nowhere else in the world.

The islands have been known by multiple names since at least the sixteenth century, when they were "discovered" and renamed several times by passing ships. They became known to the Spanish in 1543 and to Japanese officials as early as 1670. In 1675, the Tokugawa shogunate led an official survey of the islands and declared them to be Japanese territory, but the islands were not formally annexed until 1876. The name "Ogasawara" was established in the eighteenth century from the claim that Ogasawara Sadayori (dates unknown) had first discovered the islands in 1593. Although there is no hard evidence that supports this claim, the name remained. The alternative name "Bonin" originates from the Chinese characters that marked the islands on early Japanese maps, which also be read "bunin," meaning "uninhabited."