

## **Suwanoike Visitor Center**

The three-story Suwanoike Visitor Center displays the rich world of the Shimabara Peninsula, from deep beneath the earth to the stars above. The Visitor Center was built to teach children about natural science and the natural history of the region.

Hundreds of thousands of years ago, volcanic eruptions covered this area with lava. Over time, the Suwanoike Fault broke the land apart, creating a gap bounded by cliffs to the north and south. People settled on the peninsula and were able to grow a wide variety of crops in the rich volcanic soil. In the Edo period (1603–1867) local farmers built an irrigation dam on the Sakai River, creating Suwanoike Pond.

On the first floor of the Visitor Center is a model of the surrounding forests, ponds, and terraced fields. The model is surrounded by exhibits about local wildlife, especially birds; the buttons that line the walls play bird calls when pushed. The aquatic ecosystem of the pond is also modeled in detail, including its microscopic plankton.

The second-floor exhibits show the stars and other celestial bodies that can be seen from Shimabara. Hands-on exhibits explain astronomical phenomena, such as how the rotation of the earth creates the four seasons and why the moon waxes and wanes. The third-floor observatory is opened for a public stargazing event almost every weekend.