

Amami Oshima's Nature and Culture

Amami Gunto National Park

The national park was established in 2017 and spans the Amami island group, part of the Ryukyu Islands. Geologically, these islands have repeatedly connected with and broken away from Japan and Eurasia over the past 10 million years, finally separating approximately two million years ago. These shifts allowed numerous endemic animal and plant species to evolve in isolation, including the Amami rabbit, the Ryukyu long-tailed rat, and the banded ground gecko. Some of these animals are not only endangered but are also relict species that retain characteristics no longer seen in species in Japan or the Asian mainland. The national park plays an important role in protecting these endemic species and preserving the culture of the islands.

The islands have a varied topography, with distinctive coral-encircled coastlines, mountains, subtropical evergreen broadleaf forests, flatlands, and unusual rock formations. Each island in the Amami chain has a distinct culture that incorporates elements from the traditions of both Okinawa and Kyushu, but they are linked by one common thread: a lifestyle that is inextricably intertwined with the natural environment.

A Mountainous Island

The island of Amami Oshima is volcanic in origin, and its 712 square kilometers are covered by forested mountains, leaving little flat land for agriculture. The jagged coastline is peppered with inlets and headlands. In many places, the slopes of the mountains that dominate the landscape reach all the way down to the sea, creating striking vistas.

Rare Flora and Fauna

In addition to species endemic to the Ryukyu Islands, there are several that are unique to Amami Oshima. These include the Amami spiny rat and the Amami Ishikawa's frog, both of which live in the island's subtropical forests. The forests are dominated by chinquapins and ring-cupped oaks, and are the habitat of the endangered sword-tail newt among other species. The most famous local animal is perhaps the nocturnal Amami rabbit, which lives only on Amami Oshima and Tokunoshima Island. This dark-furred and relatively thickset animal has short legs and powerful claws for digging, and is thought to be a relic of archaic rabbit forms that were once widespread in continental Asia. It breeds up to twice a year, and is unusual among rabbits in that it bears only one

or two young at a time. The Amami rabbit population was threatened by the mongooses that were brought to the island to eradicate the venomous *habu* pit vipers, as the mongooses also preyed heavily on the rabbits and other endemic animals. Fortunately, the Amami Mongoose Busters initiative has largely eliminated this invasive predator and is working to restore balance to the island's ecosystem. However, feral cats are also a danger, threatening the Amami rabbit as well as other endemic species such as the Amami jay.

Living in Harmony with Nature

Many of Amami Oshima's villages are built in inlets, and traditionally islanders have lived off the bounty of the forests and the sea. A deep reverence for nature continues and living in harmony with the environment is highly valued. Most villages preserve a *kami-michi* (spirit road), which is said to mark the route spirits take from the mountains to the sea. Villagers commonly give thanks to nature when gathering wood, plants, or food, and offer a prayer to the spirits when they venture into the forests. Local festivals are deeply rooted in nature; these include the Hirase Mankai Festival, celebrated in the village of Akina, in which priestesses dance on a rock and pray for rich harvests.

Places to See

Amami Oshima offers many outstanding natural sites for visitors to explore. Just a few highlights are the Sumiyo Mangrove Forest, a popular kayaking destination, and the old-growth natural forest that covers Mt. Yuwandake (694 m), the island's tallest peak. For those who prefer leisurely nature walks, the Kinsakubaru Forest and the Amami Nature Observation Forest offer a great way to discover the local ecosystems.