

## **Amami Gunto National Park**

The national park was established in 2017 and spans the Amami island group, part of the Ryukyu Islands. Over the past 10 million years, these islands have repeatedly connected with and broken away from Japan and Eurasia, finally separating approximately two million years ago. These geological 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 on the main Japanese islands 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 of 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.

## **Tokunoshima's Natural World**

The island's two tallest peaks are Mt. Inokawadake (645 m) and Mt. Amagidake (533 m), while smaller hills pepper the landscape. The western side of the island has a rocky coastline, while the eastern side is lined with beaches. Agricultural plains lie in the island's southwest. The steep slopes of Mt. Amagidake are covered by chinquapins, hardy evergreen trees in the beech family that can withstand the strong winds which buffet the forest. Local residents say Mt. Amagidake resembles a pregnant woman sleeping, and call it *nesugata-yama* (literally, "sleeping-form-mountain").

## **Living in Harmony with Nature**

People in the Amami Islands are still deeply connected to the natural world. For instance, local residents still use Kaamu-daki, one of Mt. Amagidake's three waterfalls, as a regular water source. Islanders also venture into the mountains to collect leopard plant (*tsuwabuki*) for use in traditional dishes and pine for New Year decorations, and to pray to the mountain gods.

## **Places to See**

Some outstanding natural sites in Tokunoshima include the distinctive coastal rock formations at Mushiroze and Innojofuta, the underwater limestone caves of Unbuki, the lagoon at Aze Prince Beach, and the Kanamizaki Sotetsu Tunnel, a walking path covered by arching sago palms.