

Ainu Heritage and Traditions

This section of the museum introduces the history of Kussharo Kotan from the first documented records to the present day. Life in the *kotan* changed significantly at the start of the Meiji era (1868–1912), when sulfur mining began at nearby Mt. Io (Atosanupuri in the Ainu language). Ainu people began working in sulfur mining and other new industries, including logging on the Kushiro River.

Suppression of Ainu culture

Ainu endured many hardships during the Meiji era, facing discrimination and denial of their culture. During this period, the Japanese government enforced Hokkaido-wide assimilation policies. The government declared Ainu lands to be Imperial Agricultural Lands and forced residents to take on Japanese names. Further acts prohibited Ainu from hunting deer for food. After more than a century of institutional oppression, Ainu traditions and culture were in danger of being eradicated.

Recognizing the Ainu cultural heritage

A movement to recognize and restore Ainu cultural practices gained traction in the mid-1970s, and Ainu organizations lobbied the Japanese government to create legislation to protect Ainu culture. In the early 1980s, religious practices were restored thanks to cultural revitalization efforts, and Ainu began to perform traditional ceremonies openly again. Many Ainu ceremonies revolve around honoring animal deities. A ceremony to honor the spirit of Blakiston's fish owls was officially conducted in 1983 at Lake Kussharo for the first time since being banned during the Meiji era.

The Japanese government's passage of the Act for the Promotion of Ainu Culture in 1997 was a milestone for the protection of Ainu language, music, dance, and handicrafts. A National Diet resolution passed in 2008 replaced the 1997 law and extended its reach. In 2019, the government enacted a law officially recognizing the Ainu as an indigenous people.

Passing on Ainu traditions

Today, Ainu heritage organizations are striving to pass on their culture to future

generations. The museum displays crafts made by members of the Kussharo Kotan Upopo Association, including drawstring purses, cushions, and coasters with Ainu embroidery. A 25-minute documentary in the museum's screening room offers more information about the history of Ainu oppression and how modern Ainu are exploring their roots and keeping traditions alive. Visitors can ask to watch the video in English.