

Kushiro in the Edo Period

During the Edo period (1603–1867) some areas of Hokkaido were under the control of the Matsumae family, feudal rulers who had exclusive rights to trade with the Ainu, the indigenous people of the island. At the time, there was an Ainu village at the mouth of the Kushiro River known as Kusuri, which is said to derive from an Ainu word meaning “the way across” or “the throat.” The Matsumae family used Kusuri as a base for trading with Ainu in the area. In the beginning, retainers of the Matsumae family traded directly with the Ainu, but as a commodity economy developed, trade was taken over by merchants.

The village of Kusuri grew into the town of Kushiro, and was the center of fishing, trading and transportation in eastern Hokkaido. By the end of the Edo period, as catches of herring and salmon and the harvesting of kombu (kelp) increased, more and more fishermen came to the area from the Tohoku region. Kushiro also became the main port linking northern Japan with the Sea of Okhotsk and the Kuril Islands.