

The Imperial Family's Ties to the Nasu Area

The Nasu Imperial Villa was built in 1926 on land that had been maintained as an imperial estate since 1890. A few years earlier in 1923, Emperor Shōwa (1901–1989), then crown prince, made his first visit to the Nasu hot springs and had lunch at an inn overlooking the mountains and highlands. He was so taken by the view that he decided to build a retreat. On the villa's completion, he came to stay for a month, and during this time he made his first climb up Mt. Chausu (1,915 m).

Successive emperors have continued to use the villa as a summer retreat. Although the residence has never been open to visitors, the presence of an imperial residence in the area boosted its status as a summer resort. Beginning in the 1960s, Nasu's popularity began to skyrocket, and since the 1980s the area has seen around 5 million visitors each year. In 2008, at the request of Emperor Akihito (r. 1989–2019), around 560 hectares of the 1,225-hectare imperial estate was opened to the public and placed within the jurisdiction of Nikko National Park.

Recent emperors have pursued a strong scientific interest in nature. Emperor Shōwa researched slime molds (amoeboid protists, similar to fungi), marine invertebrates, and plants, and he published four volumes on the plants of Nasu. His collection of 60,000 specimens is held by the National Museum of Nature and Science in Tokyo. In 1962, he began releasing green pheasants—hatched as part of Tochigi Prefecture's wild bird breeding project—in the mountains of Nasu. This practice was continued by Emperor Akihito, whose scientific interest lies in the classification of fish in the goby family. Current Emperor Naruhito (b. 1960), who often goes climbing in the Nasu mountains, is himself devoted to water policy and conservation.