

## **Minakami UNESCO Biosphere Reserve**

Minakami was designated a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in 2017. UNESCO defines biospheres as “learning places for sustainable development” in which communities study their local environments in order to balance conservation of nature with sustainable use of the resources it provides.

In Japan, biosphere reserves are also called “eco-parks” (*eko-paaku*). The Minakami Biosphere Reserve (Minakami Eco-Park) includes all of Minakami and part of Niigata Prefecture, encompassing 91,368 hectares. The reserve is characterized by the rich environment created by the Tanigawa Mountain Range, which acts as the central divide between the northwest and southeast sides of Japan’s main island of Honshu. These conditions create abundant snowfall, which melts to form the headwaters of the mighty Tone River and feeds over 80,000 hectares of forest. As part of its registration as a biosphere reserve, Minakami has pledged to promote, conserve, and utilize these two core resources, as well as the plant and animal life that they sustain.

With those goals in mind, the residents of Minakami are pursuing a number of projects ranging from ecotourism and cultural promotion to conservation and revitalization of the natural wilderness. In 2003, the Japan Forestry Agency launched the Akaya Project, an initiative to study and conserve a 10,000-hectare area around the headwaters of the Akaya River. The ultimate goal of the project is to engage local organizations in self-directed, sustainable use of the area, and participants have worked on goals like promoting sustainable lumber practices, repairing check dams for erosion control, and revitalizing the local ecosystem.