

## **Geography and Topography**

Amami Oshima is one of eight inhabited islands in the Amami archipelago, which stretches over 200 kilometers between Kyushu and Okinawa. It is in the subtropical zone, about the same latitude as Nepal, the Sahara Desert, and northern Mexico. The islands were once part of a large land mass that broke off from the Eurasian continent between twelve and two million years ago. This mass later split into separate islands, the largest of which are Okinawa, Amami Oshima, and Tokunoshima. Over the millennia, the Kuroshio, a warm current that makes its way northward from the east coast of the Philippines, encouraged the formation of coral reefs.

### *Diversity in a Small Area*

Amami Oshima is divided into five administrative units of cities, towns, and villages. Amami City is the largest community, with a population of over 40,000. The island has an airport with direct flights to Japan's major cities and frequent ferry services to neighboring islands. Around 70 percent of Amami Oshima's 712 square kilometers are mountainous, with densely forested slopes rising sharply from the shoreline. Mt. Yuwan is the island's highest peak, at 694 meters. Arable land is mostly found on the flatter, northern part of the island. The island also contains Japan's largest evergreen broadleaf forest and second-largest mangrove forest.

### *An Island of Communities*

Villages on the island are called *shuraku* (communities) or *shima* ("island" in Japanese, though Amami Oshima residents use the term to refer to their specific community). Almost all are located along the coast, at the mouth of rivers. Until modern times, the communities were not connected by transport links through the interior, and relied solely on boats for commerce and travel. Today, all the communities are accessible by road thanks to a number of tunnel construction projects.