

The Fisheries Industry

Yakushima has a thriving fisheries industry in terms of both the variety and volume of fish caught, thanks to the nutrient-rich waters of the Kuroshio Current. Anbo in the southeast and Isso on the north coast of the island are the two main fishing ports.

Flying Fish

Anbo is a community of around 540 households (as of 2020) and one of Japan's leading landing ports for flying fish, which are caught in waters east of the harbor. Schools of flying fish used to come into shore at night to spawn and were pulled in by nets stretched between boats. Today, few flying fish come close to the shore for reasons that may include climate change, concrete harbors, fewer pine forests, and lack of seaweed beds for young fish to grow, and fishermen must go out to the open sea.

Flying fish swim near the surface of the ocean and do not appear on fish detectors. Fishermen estimate the size of a school by observing the number of fish that leap out when the boats approach, and set nets based on the movement of the school, wind direction, and tidal current. They then start their boats and close in on the startled flying fish, dragging them in nets between two boats. Flying fish are caught year-round, but the best season is spring to summer, which coincides with the spawning period and when the ocean temperature rises and the fish come close to the shore in search of food. In the winter, waters are rough and the catch may be smaller. Flying fish are often eaten broiled with salt or boiled. A Yakushima specialty is *tsukeage* fish balls made from flying fish that have been dried overnight, minced, and deep-fried.

Mackerel

Isso is a settlement of about 330 households (as of 2020) and the main fishing ground for mackerel. Blue mackerel, a less fatty fish than the chub mackerel found further north in Japan, is caught by line and rod offshore. Fishermen leave port at night on boats with a capacity of no more than four or five people and return early the following day with their catch from the morning. Most of the haul is processed—first boiled to remove the fat, then smoked and dried for several days. The dried mackerel is fermented with a natural mold that gives it a distinctive flavor. Called *sababushi*, the dried fish is used to make soba noodle stock and condiments such as *okonomiyaki* sauce.

The “broken-necked blue mackerel” is a delicacy that can now be eaten only on Yakushima. Local fishermen snap the neck of the fish to drain its blood as soon as it is pulled from the water, a method established back in the late nineteenth century to preserve the fish when there were no refrigerators or ice. Although mackerel is often not

eaten raw because of parasite concerns, the broken-necked blue mackerel is highly fresh, safe to consume, and delicious.

Mackerel Smoking Plants

Several mackerel smoking plants that make *sababushi* using the traditional boiling and smoking method are located close to Isso harbor. One is more than 200 years old. All are privately run but open to the public, offering demonstrations of mackerel cleaning, processing, and packaging. It is possible to visit multiple plants and try their various products.