

World Natural Heritage Site Shirakami Sanchi: Akita Prefecture Area

The 16,971-hectare Shirakami Sanchi World Natural Heritage Site contains the largest remaining primeval beech forest in East Asia. Registered by UNESCO in 1993, it is part of the 130,000-hectare Shirakami Sanchi mountain wilderness that spans Akita and Aomori Prefectures. The Akita portion of the UNESCO site covers over 4,300 hectares.

The World Natural Heritage Site is divided into two zones: a protected core zone and a buffer zone. The core area has been largely untouched by humans for over 8,000 years, and access is tightly restricted. The buffer zone encircles the core zone, and there visitors can experience forested terrain similar to that of the core zone.

The Japanese beech (*buna*) is at the heart of Shirakami Sanchi's rich ecosystem. In addition to sustaining animals and undergrowth, beech trees help regulate water levels in the area—thus mitigating droughts and reducing floods and landslides. Beeches can grow to more than 30 meters in height and live for centuries. Around 100 tree species and hundreds of other plant species are also found in the area.

Shirakami Sanchi's forests contain 35 mammal species, 90 bird species, 13 amphibian species, and 9 species of reptile. These animals include Asian black bears, Japanese macaques, and Japanese serows (shaggy creatures sometimes called "goat-antelopes" that are members of the bovine family).

Rivers and tumbling waterfalls cut through the valleys between steep mountain slopes. Some of Shirakami Sanchi's tallest peaks on the Akita side are Mt. Fujisato-Komagatake (1,158 m), Mt. Futatsumori (1,086 m), and Mt. Kodake (1,042 m). Mt. Tomeyama, less than 180 meters tall, is one of the lowest peaks in the area, but is significant for the prohibition of logging there more than 300 years ago.