

Introduction to Myoko-Togakushi renzan National Park

Welcome to Myoko-Togakushi renzan National Park. Created in March 2015, the park encompasses 39,772 hectares of mountains and highlands that straddle the border of Niigata and Nagano Prefectures. Despite its relatively small area, the park is renowned for the density and scenic diversity of its mountains, which were formed through a variety of volcanic and non-volcanic geological processes.

The national park's many hiking trails run through forests of beech and birch, past flowering wetlands and roaring waterfalls, and alongside lakes that reflect the surrounding peaks. When snow brings the hiking season to a close, the park becomes a wonderland of ski slopes, snowshoe trails, and ice-covered lakes. Between outdoor adventures, there is always something to explore in the area's shrines, temples, museums, crafting workshops, and hot springs.

A Land of Heavy Snows

The Myoko-Togakushi area is one of the snowiest regions in Japan. Cold winds blowing from the continental mainland encounter the warm, moist air mass over the Sea of Japan; the moisture-laden air then hits the Myoko-Togakushi mountain range, causing it to condense and deposit the moisture as snow. As the snow melts, it becomes a plentiful resource of clear, clean water that nourishes plant, animal, and human life in the region.

Abundant Plant Life

The park contains widely varied ecosystems, from grassy pastures to dense forests filled with oaks and beeches that have stood for centuries. Thanks to the heavy snowfalls, some of the mountains in this area can support rare alpine plant species that normally live at higher altitudes, such as the wedgeleaf primrose. In summer, highland marshes burst into flower, attracting alpine butterflies.

Diverse Wildlife

Black bears frequent much of the park, and in winter, the deep snows reveal the tracks of serows. Amphibians like the forest green tree frog, Japanese black salamander, and fire-bellied newt inhabit the ponds and slow-moving streams. Endangered species like the rock ptarmigan (*raicho*) depend upon the protected environment to maintain their fragile populations.

Living Close to Nature

The rigors of the mountains have set the tone of life in the Myoko-Togakushi region for

centuries. Ties to mountain worship and mountain asceticism (Shugendo) remain strong in the area, as is evident in celebrations like the Fire Festival held at Sekiyama Shrine. Food culture also reflects the mountainous environment. Plentiful water from the mountains nourishes rice production in the lowlands, while hardy buckwheat (*soba*) is grown in the cooler, higher-elevation areas of Togakushi where rice is difficult to cultivate. Mountain-grown bamboo provides the material for a thriving tradition of basketry and other handicrafts.

Volcanic and Non-Volcanic Mountains, Side-by-Side

Mountains of both volcanic and non-volcanic origin are densely clustered within the Myoko-Togakushi area. The national park's many spectacular peaks have given rise to the catchphrase "Five Mountains in a Single View" (*hitome gozan*). The region's complex geology and topography sustain a wealth of living things, including the people who live here.

What Is a Japanese National Park?

In 1957, Japan enacted the Natural Park Act to protect places of natural scenic beauty; to conserve biological diversity; and to promote the health, recreation, and culture of the country's people. In this regard, Japanese national parks resemble their counterparts around the world. However, unlike parks in many other countries, most of Japan's national parks are not huge tracts of uninhabited wilderness; they also encompass the communities that have existed there for centuries.

When Japan began creating national parks in the early twentieth century, much of the suitable land was already owned or inhabited, and the government could not simply relocate entire towns. To create a national park, officials had first to identify a natural landscape they wished to preserve, then work with private, municipal, and national landholders in the area to create a system of joint use and protection. As a result, Japan's national parks are both treasured natural preserves and models of harmony between the land and the people who live there.

The Establishment of Myoko-Togakushi renzan National Park

In 1956, the Myoko-Togakushi region was incorporated into Joshin'etsukogen National Park, which had been established seven years prior. However, the two areas were not linked geographically, and they had distinctly different regional and topographical characteristics. In recognition of these differences, in 2015 the Myoko-Togakushi region was designated its own national park.

Seasonal Activities

Each season is marked by its own outdoor activities and special events. Campgrounds and countless hiking trails cater to explorers of the woodlands and marshes, where rare wildflowers bloom in spring. Birders can spot over 100 species here, including migratory summer visitors like the narcissus flycatcher. Canoeing, kayaking, and fishing are popular on Lake Nojiri, which also hosts a bi-annual fossil excavation on its shores in March. Winter belongs to snow sports and fishing for Japanese pond smelt.

***Hitome Gozan*: “Five Mountains in a Single View”**

Park visitors may hear references to *hitome gozan*, a catchphrase that literally means “five mountains in a single glance.” The phrase does not refer to any specific five mountains or place to view them, and even the number five is simply intended to convey the idea of “many.” Instead, the phrase expresses the fact that the densely clustered peaks of Myoko-Togakushi renzan National Park can be viewed from countless perspectives.