

Japan's National Parks

How they began

The Japanese government designated its first group of 12 national parks in the three years from 1934 to 1936, following the passage of the National Parks Act in 1931. One of its provisions was that the parks – selected for the exceptional beauty of their landscapes – should contribute to people's health and happiness by offering access to activities such as mountain trekking, fishing, and camping. Many of the parks are rich in hot springs, and hot-spring bathing was one of the activities on the list.

The creation of national parks was an idea that originated in the United States (Congress had established its first national park, Yellowstone, in 1872), but Japan took a different approach. While the U.S. had vast tracts of uninhabited wilderness that could be designated national parks, Japan's national parks have always included privately owned land. (In one extreme case, over nine-tenths of Ise-Shima National Park is in private hands.) The symbiotic relationship between nature and human inhabitants is an intrinsic feature of these parks.

The first national parks in Japan included several internationally known locations, such as Fuji-Hakone National Park, home to Mt. Fuji, long a symbol of Japan. Nikko National Park, a mountainous area north of Tokyo, had been a destination since the late nineteenth century for wealthy foreign merchants escaping the summer heat. Other national parks were set in pristine and remote mountainous areas.

Writing in 1932 and using the rather mystical, nationalistic language that was typical of that era, Oshima Tatsujiro, director-general of the branch of the Home Ministry that administered the national parks, painted a vision of them as “the essence of the land inherited from our ancestors,” “the concentrated essence of Japan, Land of the Gods,” and “the cradle of the Japanese spirit, the incubator and embodiment of Japanese culture.” The same could be said of the hot springs found throughout Towada-Hachimantai National Park, a vast expanse of volcanically active terrain in the northernmost part of Japan's main island of Honshu.