

Why is Shirakami-Sanchi a Natural World Heritage Site?

Shirakami-Sanchi's 17,000-hectare protected zone remains virtually untouched by human activity and contains the largest virgin beech forest in East Asia. In 1993, it was declared one of Japan's first UNESCO Natural World Heritage Sites for its ecological importance. The effect of climate and topography on biodiversity is exemplified by the history and characteristics of Shirakami-Sanchi's ecosystem.

Naturally Protected and Resilient Trees

Beech trees covered most of the Arctic until the Last Glacial Period (11,500 to 120,000 years ago). As global temperatures fell, northern regions became too cold to support forests of beech trees. In response, the trees spread south, to more temperate regions, dispersing seeds and establishing new forests.

This migration occurred in Europe, North America, and elsewhere, but it was often impeded by natural barriers, such as mountain ranges. In

contrast, beech forests were able to spread south through the lowlands of northern Japan, ranging as far south as Kyushu. When global temperatures rose again 11,500 years ago, the beech forests were reestablished here at Shirakami-Sanchi, along with a new generation of diverse plant and animal species, like dogtooth violets and the black woodpecker.

Shirakami-Sanchi's sheer slopes and deep ravines are poorly suited for human settlement, and people entered the forests only to hunt and gather wild edible plants. In other parts of Japan, beech forests were cut down and replaced with more profitable cedar. However, Shirakami-Sanchi's remoteness and steep terrain have helped the forest's ecosystem remain largely undisturbed.