

The Popularization of Oze in the Meiji Period

It was not until the Meiji period (1868–1912) that Oze began to be recognized for its natural beauty and ecological importance. Among the people who helped bring this land into public consciousness were the artist Oshita Tojiro (1870–1911) and the environmentalist Hirano Chozo (1870–1930).

Seeing the world anew

After the Meiji Restoration of 1868, the government abandoned the isolationist policies of the Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1868) and made sweeping social and cultural reforms. People began to come into contact with foreign cultures, adopting new customs and pastimes. Oshita received training in watercolor painting under the tutelage of Western-style painters, and later honed his craft independently. A trip to Australia in 1898 inspired him to take a closer look at the natural landscapes of his home country and capture their distinctive elements in his paintings.

In 1908, Oshita traveled to Oze with three fellow artists and made sketches of the landscapes. The watercolors he eventually completed were exhibited in Tokyo and published in the watercolor-painting magazine *Mizue*, along with excerpts from the journal he kept on the excursion. Oshita's artwork sparked public interest in Oze and led to an increase in visitors in the following years.

Oze's trailblazer and guardian

Hirano Chozo, a native of Hinoemata, Fukushima, was another early proponent of Oze's cultural value. He opened up a trail on Mt. Hiuchigatake in 1889 and founded a shrine on the mountaintop. Hirano's devotion to the local landscape was evident in his efforts to promote conservation, as was the goodwill he forged with his contemporaries such as Oshita Tojiro. In 1992, he erected a nearby monument to Oshita in gratitude for the artist's contributions to Oze.

Hirano's descendants have carried on his deep affection for and desire to protect Oze. The Chozo Hut near Lake Ozenuma is a symbol of the Hirano

family's long-standing connection to the land.