

## **Oze and the Aizu-Numata Kaido**

Oze is midway along the Aizu-Numata Kaido, a trade and transportation route over the border of present-day Fukushima and Gunma Prefectures. The marshes, lakes, and mountains of Oze became widely known in the mid-twentieth century for their natural beauty and ecological significance as a direct result of the artwork, writings, and activism of influential cultural figures.

Proposals to harness the land's natural resources for hydroelectric power and to build a paved highway between Fukushima and Gunma triggered citizen-led movements against development. Today, the name Oze is synonymous with environmental conservation in Japan. The land was designated part of Nikko National Park in 1934, and Oze National Park became its own autonomous entity in 2007. Lake Ozenuma and the marshes of Oze are recognized under the Ramsar Convention as an important habitat for migratory birds.

*A trail steeped in history*

The Aizu-Numata Kaido is an old trail that connects the villages of Hinoemata (in Aizu, Fukushima Prefecture) and Katashina (in Numata, Gunma Prefecture). During the Edo period (1603–1867), residents from both sides traveled to Sanpei-shita on the shores of Lake Ozenuma to trade goods such as rice, sake, salt, and oil. They also used the route to access areas for hunting, fishing, and logging; core industries that provided a livelihood for the region.

During the Boshin War (1868–1869), samurai loyal to the Tokugawa shogunate built defensive earthworks in Oe Marsh. The route figured in the crucial final stages of this civil war, which ended political rule by the shogun and restored the emperor to sovereign rule. One of the earthworks remains in the marsh. Reconnaissance teams from both the Aizu coalition forces loyal to the shogunate and imperial forces loyal to the emperor patrolled the Sanpei-toge Pass and Lake Ozenuma, occasionally engaging in minor skirmishes.

*Modern tourism and the growth of environmental consciousness*

Artist Oshita Tojiro (1870–1911), outdoorsman Hirano Chozo (1870–1930), and botanist Takeda Hisayoshi (1883–1972) raised Oze’s profile in their respective cultural spheres. Takeda and Hirano, along with Hirano’s son and grandson, successfully defended Oze from major development projects in the twentieth century.

Nonetheless, overtourism during the mid-twentieth century led to an excess of trash and damage to the fragile environment. In response conservation measures were implemented, such as building wooden boardwalks in the marshes and placing restrictions on access by private vehicles. In 1972, a coalition of governmental and nongovernmental organizations pioneered a “take your trash home” campaign in Oze, and more than 1,400 trash cans were removed from the area. This campaign is widely credited with inspiring similar initiatives in national parks throughout Japan.