

Yambaru's History and Culture

Yambaru has likely been inhabited since the last few centuries BCE. By the fourteenth century, it was part of the Hokuzan Kingdom, one of three kingdoms on the island of Okinawa. The Hokuzan Kingdom was defeated by the armies of its southern neighbor, the Chuzan Kingdom, in 1416. Chuzan unified the three realms into the Ryukyu Kingdom, which lasted from 1429 until it was dissolved by Japan's Meiji government and became Okinawa Prefecture in 1879.

A People Connected to Their Natural Surroundings

The people of Yambaru have historically relied on the forests for essential resources. From the time of the Ryukyu Kingdom on, they used traditional Yambaru sailing boats to transport charcoal, firewood, bamboo, and timber to other parts of Okinawa Island in exchange for other necessities. The lumber was used to build everything from castles to ships. This practice continued into the years following World War II, when the forests supplied

materials for the reconstruction of the island. Remnants of the early years of local industry—such as kilns for making charcoal and pots for fermenting indigo—can still be found in the Yambaru forests.

The Ryukyuan Spiritual World

Ryukyuan traditional spirituality believed that the sea and mountains are one. Under the Ryukyu Kingdom's administrative system, women called *noro* served as priestesses for each village. They communicated with the gods and presided at traditional festivals in which people expressed their gratitude for nature's blessings, drove away evil spirits, and prayed for good harvests and a bountiful catch.

Yambaru Communities

Today, Yambaru is home to a population of under 10,000 residents divided among three villages. The layouts and settings of Yambaru communities

reflect Ryukyuan customs that facilitate the use of natural resources and maintain traditional lifestyles. Settlements were originally organized

around rivers, with designated areas for activities such as farming and charcoal making, and the reefs offshore provided seafood and seaweed.