

Arao-higata

Geographical Coordinates: 32°58'N, 130°25'E / Altitude: 0m / Area: 754ha / Major Type of Wetland: Tidal flat / Designation: Special Protection Area of National Wildlife Protection Area / Municipalities Involved: Arao City, Kumamoto Prefecture / Ramsar Designation: July 2012 / Ramsar Criteria: 1, 2, 6 / EAAFP Flyway Network Site

Tidal Flat



Arao-higata in the dusk



Saunders's Gull



A flock of sandpipers

General Overview:

The tidal flat on the eastern coast of the middle part of the Ariake Sea is one of the largest single tidal flats in Japan with a maximum width of 3.2km, a maximum length of 9.1km and an area of 1,656ha. Arao-higata is a part of this tidal flat and as it has no major river inflow, sediments and shells carried by the tide accumulate on the sea bottom forming sand banks near the low tide line. The tidal flats in the Ariake Sea have served as rich habitats for various living organisms such as lugworms (Polychaeta), shellfish, small crustaceans and a number of migratory birds. It has long been used as a ground for laver cultivation and clam fishing. Every summer, "A Day for Fishing Japanese Mud Shrimp" is held by Arao City with more than 900 local residents and visitors to celebrate the blessing of tidal flat.

Rich Diversity of Life in Arao-higata:

Arao-higata is mostly sandy and not like the boggy mudflats in Saga Prefecture, even within the same Ariake Sea.

Sediments carried by tidal currents are rich in organic matter. As the tide ebbs and flows, sediments roil and mix with the seawater. The sea water rich in organic matter supports seaweeds and innumerable planktons that become the food source for the benthos of sandy habitat, such as lugworms, clams and small crustaceans. Furthermore, there are diverse living organisms such as waterfowls feeding on those benthos and fish in shallow water. Arao-higata is called the 'treasure sea' by the local people and

clam harvesting and laver cultivation have thrived since the old days.

A Major Stopover Site for Migratory Birds:

Arao-higata is a stopover and wintering habitat for a number of shorebirds from autumn to spring. A number of shorebirds such as Kentish Plover, Grey-tailed Tattler, Black-bellied Plover, Red-necked Stint, Terek Sandpiper and Lesser Sand Plover stopover in autumn, while birds such as Dunlin and Kentish Plover spend winter. Meanwhile, the spring brings birds such as Bar-tailed Godwit, Black-bellied Plover and Grey-tailed Tattler. During the survey of "Monitoring site 1000, Survey on Shorebirds" conducted by the Ministry of the Environment in spring 2020, 2,963 birds were counted, marking the third highest population in Japan.

In addition, Arao-higata is an important wintering habitat for a number of vulnerable migratory birds such as Black-faced Spoonbill, cited as "endangered" in the Red List of the Ministry of the Environment, along with Common Shelduck and Saunders's Gull cited as "vulnerable".

Conservation Efforts for the Tidal Flat:

Although laver aquaculture and clam fishing remain active today, outputs are decreasing due to red tides caused by water quality degradation, resource exhaustion, and other factors. To recover the fishing grounds, the local fishing cooperative is conducting restoration work including tidal flat cultivation and sand scattering. The plowing for clam cultivation contributes to increase the resources in

the tidal flat. In addition, the practice in clam cultivation to use young shells originated only from Arao is another example of fishery methods in Arao that coexist with the tidal flat.

Meanwhile, the people of the coastal community of Arao City are engaged in activities to protect the nature of the Ariake Sea. For example, they created "The Art Museum at the Sea" on coastal embankments to raise public awareness of the natural environment. They also organize regular beach clean-ups and bird watching meetings in collaboration with the Kumamoto branch of the Wild Bird Society of Japan. In addition, the governments of the 4 prefectures around the Ariake Sea conduct simultaneous beach clean-ups every August. The Arao-higata Waterfowl and Wetland Center, which opened in August 2019, serves as a base facility that promotes conservation and wise use of Arao-higata.

Contact Information:

Arao City Office
<http://www.city.arao.lg.jp/>

