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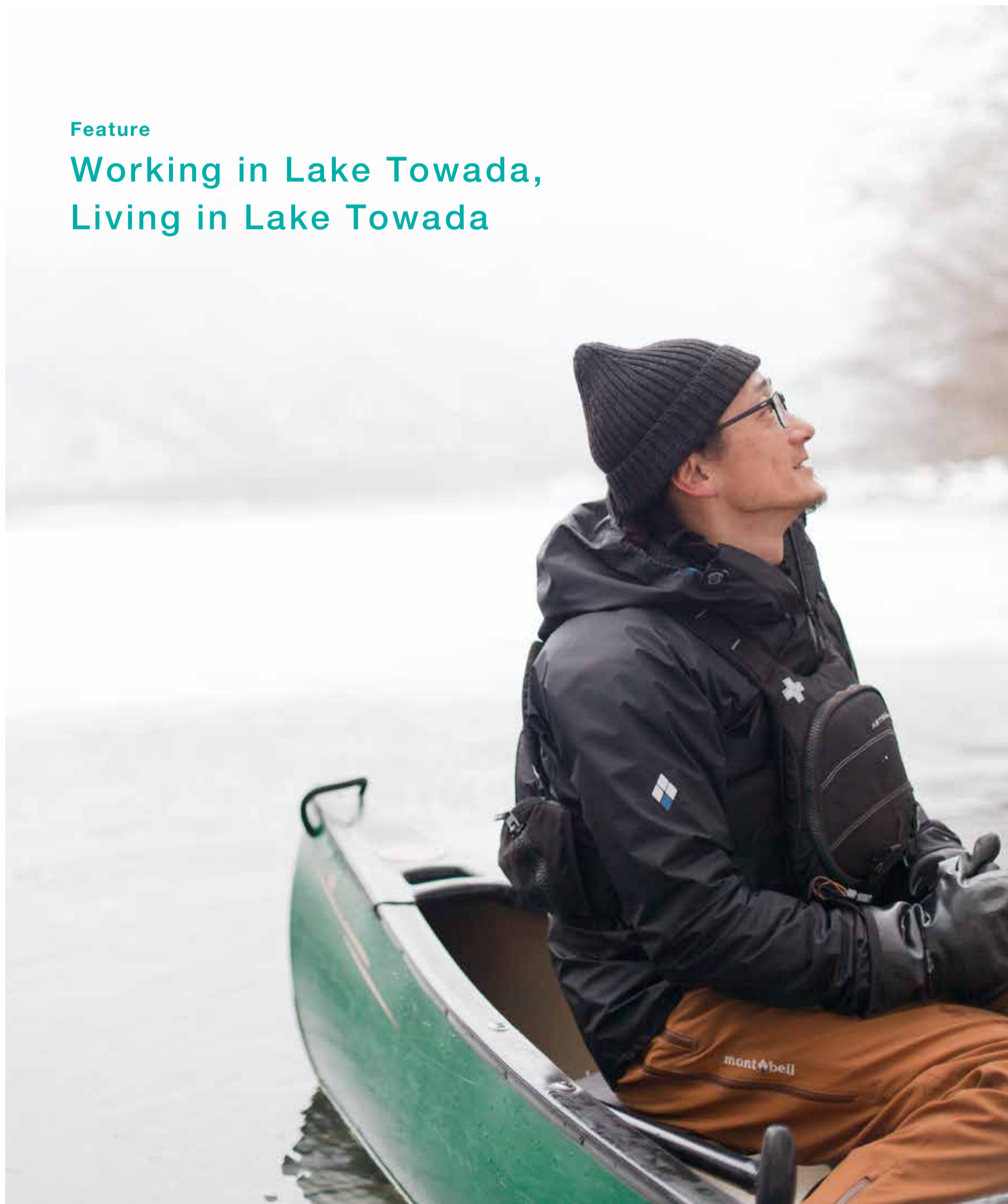
Listen to the harmony woven by nature and the people of Lake Towada

Towada Note

トワダノオト

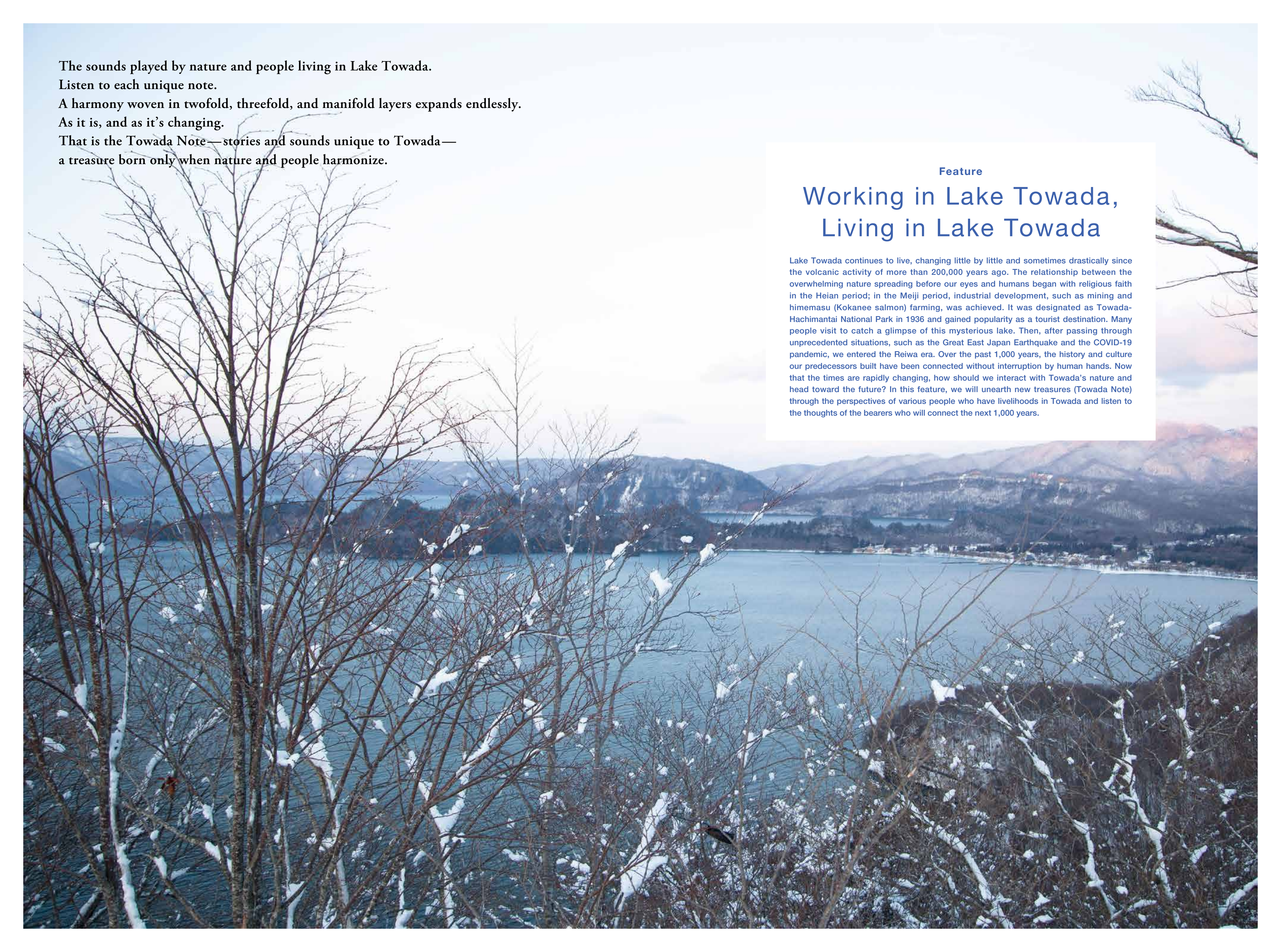
Feature

Working in Lake Towada, Living in Lake Towada



Interview

Yasuhiro Ota, Representative of Towadako Guidehouse Kai / Michiaki Ogisawa, Manager of the Hatchery, Lake Towada Propagation Fisheries Cooperative Association /
Hideyuki Nakamura, CEO, Towadaso Co., Ltd. / Iwao Ando, Deputy Secretary General and General Manager of Regional Management Department, Towada Oirase Tourism Organization /
Yoko Morita, Local gift and Local cuisine MORITA / Kazuki Nakagawa, Chairman, Lake Towada Nature Guide Club /
Mikiko Shibata, Station Manager, Michi-no-Eki Towadako; Kazuhiro Shibata, Operations Manager / Mitsuaki Sue, General Manager, Towada Prince Hotel



The sounds played by nature and people living in Lake Towada.
Listen to each unique note.
A harmony woven in twofold, threefold, and manifold layers expands endlessly.
As it is, and as it's changing.
That is the Towada Note—stories and sounds unique to Towada—
a treasure born only when nature and people harmonize.

Feature

Working in Lake Towada, Living in Lake Towada

Lake Towada continues to live, changing little by little and sometimes drastically since the volcanic activity of more than 200,000 years ago. The relationship between the overwhelming nature spreading before our eyes and humans began with religious faith in the Heian period; in the Meiji period, industrial development, such as mining and himemasu (Kokanee salmon) farming, was achieved. It was designated as Towada-Hachimantai National Park in 1936 and gained popularity as a tourist destination. Many people visit to catch a glimpse of this mysterious lake. Then, after passing through unprecedented situations, such as the Great East Japan Earthquake and the COVID-19 pandemic, we entered the Reiwa era. Over the past 1,000 years, the history and culture our predecessors built have been connected without interruption by human hands. Now that the times are rapidly changing, how should we interact with Towada's nature and head toward the future? In this feature, we will unearth new treasures (Towada Note) through the perspectives of various people who have livelihoods in Towada and listen to the thoughts of the bearers who will connect the next 1,000 years.

Accepting Lake Towada As It Is



Representative of Towadako Guidehouse Kai

Yasuhiro Ota

Profile

Born in 1981 on the shores of Lake Towada. Went to Tokyo aspiring to study music. Returned home, triggered by a music event at Lake Towada. Representative of Towadako Guidehouse Kai.

I'm Glad I Came Back to Lake Towada

"When I was small, I always wanted to go beyond that outer rim (caldera wall). The department stores and supermarkets in the city were more attractive. My playground was the forest and the lake, but I thought there was nothing here. I might have had few opportunities to know how wonderful Lake Towada is. When I was a child, Lake Towada was a very busy place."

Nature guide Yasuhiro Ota's parents' home is Cafe Ikoi located on the lakeshore of Yasumiya. He left Lake Towada in high school, and after graduating, he went to Tokyo to be a musician. He returned home for a music festival at Lake Towada. Afterward, he joined a guide company that operates in Towada and Oirase in 2010. While continuing music modestly, he began working with guiding activities as his main focus.

"At first, I just learned things desperately. I hadn't had the opportunity to learn about nature properly until then, so it might have been the hardest I've ever worked in my life. But as the forest I had vaguely thought was nice began to have names, I was happy that the resolution gradually increased. That was also my first time in a Canadian canoe. I learned kayaking in extracurricular classes in elementary school, though. Thinking back now, that might have been one of the triggers for liking nature."

Seven years ago, Ota launched Towadako Guidehouse Kai with friends. He now presides over canoe tours on Lake Towada.



"Towada and Oirase have a primeval and deep image, right? Yet they say there are no endemic species. It's a rare forest born from the coexistence of universal plant and animal species. This is an amazing thing. Furthermore, anyone can approach such a forest just by opening a single door. It's often called QTA: high-quality (Q) nature, trails (T) are maintained, and access (A) is good. We have all of these."

In other words, this top-class nature gently accepts even people with disabilities. Ota told us that this is what moves his heart the most right now.

"They are working on the Field Museum Concept in Oirase and various regions, and it truly is a museum, isn't it? This nature itself is the permanent exhibition, and spring, summer, autumn, and winter are the special exhibitions. If a tree falls naturally, that's already an event. After that, you can see the transition of vegetation. It's so interesting! I'm really glad I came back."

Observing Nature in Three-Dimensional Layers

When one visits Lake Towada, their eyes tend to be captivated by the lake due to its size, characteristic shape, and transparency, but it becomes fun when viewed more three-dimensionally—even more so if

one proceeds on the lake in a canoe.

"Looking at the plants by the water's edge or the Ogura Peninsula, you realize that this is inside a caldera formed by a volcanic eruption and is surrounded by the outer rim mountains. You also get closer to the forest. I was very moved when I saw Lake Towada in a three-dimensional way, so I want to convey what moved me to the guests."

The huge caldera, forest and water, various living creatures, and moss and fungi.... It is Ota and the nature guides who connect the scattered parts.

"I mentioned earlier that there are no endemic species, but I thought that perhaps coming without a purpose, like coming to see something specific, might be more moving. I want people to see the changing nature at various times. It would be the best if you could stop by casually and encounter a moment in which you feel good."

At the time of the interview, Lake Towada was in a sideways blizzard. It was not quite a day where one could "feel good"...

"You wouldn't go out into the field on such a stormy day, right? (Laughs). But this



1 Mistletoe is an evergreen plant that is semiparasitic on deciduous broad-leaved trees, such as beech and mizunara oak. Birds eat the berries and carry the seeds. From spring to autumn, leaves cover its form, but it stands out in winter when leaves have fallen. 2 The Ogura Peninsula is part of a lava dome formed by volcanic activity. It is shaped like a whale. 3 Canoe tours can be enjoyed throughout the year. The monochrome world is unique to winter.

is nature living and moving. Saying that nature is alive even in times of silence is a beautiful story, but I feel life precisely on stormy days. That's why silence looks better, and because there is winter, you want to see the fresh greenery. Of course, the worldview of winter is also very wonderful."

Spring, summer, autumn, winter, and of course, 365 days a year, you will never encounter the same Lake Towada any two days in your life. Ota taught us something obvious that we tend to lose sight of. When one accepts nature as it is, the way Lake Towada looks changes.

"I think it was protected because there was faith and the lake was a sanctuary, and because there was a mine, roads were maintained, making access easier. It is thanks to our predecessors that we can see this first-class nature so casually. It's an accumulation of history. If you look at nature and lifestyle individually, there might not be anything that is 'only here.' But human hands have made this place first-class. I think that is the Lake Towada brand."

It is not just a collection of nature, but Lake Towada makes you feel that human power is acting very strongly.

"I wonder what Lake Towada thinks of us."

A Person Connecting the Context of History

Manager of the Hatchery, Lake Towada Propagation Fisheries Cooperative Association

Michiaki Ogisawa

Profile

Born in 1963 on the shores of Lake Towada. A fisherman, also working as the himemasa hatchery chief. He loves cooking and searches daily for ways to make the most of himemasa.



1 Ogisawa commutes to the hatchery even in winter to rear fry. About 100,000 fry are reared in one tank (1.5m×8m×0.6m). 2 Processed goods, such as smoked fish and overnight-dried fish, that Ogisawa is prototyping. 3 The hatchery also accepts elementary school social studies field trips.

The Responsibility of Working at Lake Towada

Many people who visit Lake Towada probably want to eat himemasa (Kokanee salmon) at least once. Its beautiful pink flesh is transformed into sashimi, grilled fish, smoked fish, tempura, etc., captivating many tourists. Masuko (himemasa eggs) is also reputedly delicious. However, himemasa did not live in Lake Towada from the beginning.

Low water temperature, the high wall of Choshi O-taki waterfall in Oirase Gorge. It was Sadayuki Wainai from Kazuno City, Akita Prefecture, who launched a fish farming business in Lake Towada, which was said to be a lake fish did not inhabit due to various natural conditions. Wishing to feed people working in the mines fresh fish (Lake Towada was developed as a mine since the Edo period), he conducted research for over 20 years and built an artificial hatchery in 1897. Even after tackling the hatchery business in earnest, he failed many times, but in 1903, when he hatched and released himemasa eggs received from Lake Shikotsu in Hokkaido, a large number of himemasa returned to the hatchery 3 years later. Fish farming began at this time, utilizing the himemasa's habit of returning to the place where they were born.

More than 100 years later, the Lake Towada Propagation Fisheries Cooperative Association has taken over the himemasa hatching business. Michiaki Ogisawa, a union member who also works as a fisherman, serves as the hatchery chief, handling everything from egg collection to fry rearing and release. Around October, about 1 million eggs are collected annually from parent himemasa that have returned (of which about 700,000 grow and are released) and hatched. Fertilized eggs are sorted while workers check whether each egg is alive. Even in the winter after fishing ends, work at the hatchery is endless, including cleaning tanks and feeding the fry.

"If you don't clean, they eat their own nutrient-less feces. Growth slows down. If they get sick, it infects and ruins all the fry in one tank, so it's nerve-wracking." Spring water with a constant temperature throughout the year is used for the tank water. Because accumulated temperature (data for salmon suggest an accumulated water temperature of about 780 to 800°C is required until hatching) is involved in growth, they cannot rely on river water, whose temperature drops in winter.

"This year (at the time of the 2022 interview), we couldn't catch himemasa due to heavy rain damage. The hatchery managed to reuse males and hatch the usual amount of eggs, though. I think there is also the impact of global warming. In the past, there were times when we inspected eggs at New Year's. The seasons are becoming earlier. We are greatly swayed by changes in the weather, and there are many things we can't compete with, but we just have to do what we can."

Ogisawa was born into a fisherman's family in the Utarube district. He graduated from a high school electrical course and went to work in Tokyo but returned home after a year because his father's health deteriorated. Immediately after returning, he worked at a hotel or leased his fishing rights to others and did other jobs, but when his father passed away, he decided it was time to get serious and proceeded on the path of a fisherman.

"My mother is still energetic, and I thought it would be pitiful to throw away the fishing profession my father worked hard at. It wasn't about Lake Towada being good or wanting to become a fisherman."

We asked Ogisawa, who has lived in this land since he was small, how Lake Towada looks to him.

"Lake Towada? It's so obvious I've never thought about it. If I go out on the lake by boat every day, this is the scenery. I was taken fishing since I was small. In elementary school, the roads weren't plowed, so I went to school pushing through waist-high snow ... nothing but painful memories (laughs). I wore jerseys that looked like they'd get holes if I fell. I was in the midst of too much nature."

Ogisawa lives by accepting rather than choosing the life of a fisherman of Lake Towada and working at the hatchery.

"There is a sense of responsibility. People's livelihood in Lake Towada depends on it, and I can't let what Mr. Wainai started end in my generation."

Communicating Appeal for the Next Generation

"How do you eat himemasa? I hardly eat it raw. I dry it overnight, smoke it, or make fish sauce. Frozen ruibe (frozen sashimi) is also delicious."

Lake Towada Himemasa is branded and sold with determined standards. Currently, nonstandard fish and parent trout used for egg collection are mostly discarded. Reacting to this situation, Ogisawa has been trying various processing methods. He says he uses fish sauce as a secret ingredient when making ramen; he is quite fond of cooking.

"Discarding is wasteful. I've wanted to do something about it for a long time, and now things are finally starting to move."

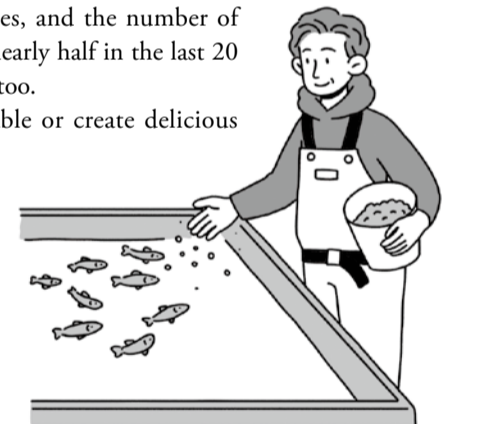
The Lake Towada Himemasa Brand Promotion Council, launched by Kosaka Town and Towada City in cooperation with regional organizations, such as the Fishery Cooperative and the Chamber of Commerce, has been continuously holding campaigns, such as Let's Eat Lake Towada Himemasa, for several years. In 2022, they began considering the utilization of unused himemasa, started trial production of fish sauce, and released it in 2024.

"They say tourism is difficult now without it being experience-based. Selling more and more himemasa like this is good, but unless we convey the charm of the fisherman, the number of people catching them won't increase."

The number of young fishermen in Lake Towada has decreased significantly. Even if parents are fishermen, most of the generation do not say they will succeed them. Aging continues, and the number of cooperative members has decreased by nearly half in the last 20 years. Ogisawa is concerned about that, too.

"If we make fishing experiences available or create delicious processed products, I think the charm will be conveyed and himemasa fishing in Lake Towada will be sustained."

Driven to bridge the history of himemasa propagation begun by Sadayuki Wainai, there are people who are now exploring new initiatives to ensure this livelihood endures for the next generation.



Accommodation Facility That Built an Era



CEO, Towadaso Co., Ltd.
Chairman, Lake Towada National Park Association

Hideyuki Nakamura

Profile
Born in 1955 on the shores of Lake Towada. After graduating from Gakushuin University, he took over the family business. He supports tourism in Lake Towada, including excavating hot springs and serving as the executive committee chairman for the Winter Story festival.

From a 5-Room Guest House to a Large Hotel, Managing Lake Towada's Festivals

"The Kunizakai Festival was a very interesting festival. I was in charge of Kuroishi Yosare and Hanawa Bayashi, and I persuaded them to come all the way to Lake Towada."

Looking back on those days is Hideyuki Nakamura, who manages Towadaso, the largest accommodation facility in Lake Towada. The Kunizakai Matsuri was a luxurious festival where major festivals from Aomori, Akita, and Iwate gathered together at Lake Towada; 29 editions were held until 2010. It was two days when Lake Towada was wrapped in a vortex of great joy, with more than 10 festivals, such as Aomori Nebuta, Hachinohe Enburi, Hanawa Bayashi, Akita Kanto, and Morioka Sansa Odori, gathering at the current North Parking Lot.

"Originally, it was proposed by a major travel agency saying let's do something fun together. The money was split between the travel agency and the region. Since there were no subsidies, we all had to cover it ourselves. It was hard to organize how to get rivals—the masters of their own castles, like Grand Hotel, Kanko Hotel, Kohanso—to pay and move. Towadaso served as the Execution Committee chairman, but compared to other hotels, we were newcomers. But my father, Shuzo, was good at that. He showed that he was burdened the most. He put out the most money and personnel from his own place. By doing so, he convinced those around him and got their cooperation."

The elevated viewing platform for the Kunizakai Matsuri was assembled and dismantled in cooperation with employees from each accommodation facility, shop, and business partner. Calling in festivals is no ordinary feat. Floats are needed, of course, and personnel—transportation, accommodation, meal costs...

It is said that the total expenses were 20 million yen. However, the sales generated for Lake Towada was 200 million yen in two days, so that amount alone had a huge impact. You can feel the excitement of this festival.

"I was worried because Prince Hotel and Towada Hotel are a bit far from the venue, but I was relieved when they told me, 'We are receiving plenty of spillover benefits,' because I'm happy when everyone makes a profit."

Towadaso's predecessor was a 5-room guest house. Before that, they did business making smoked himemasu (kokanee) and shrimp and wholesaling them to facilities. Afterward, they moved to the current location and increased the number of rooms. It expanded to 180 rooms in the previous generation and gradually to 234 rooms in Hideyuki's generation.

"My father was a drinker and a free spirit, so my mother often went on sales calls. She would get school trips from Hokkaido, so we ran out of rooms and expanded. I joined here right after graduating from university, but I was entrusted with it at 27 or 28, so I just kept running from there (laughs) because no one stopped me."

That period was the peak of group travel. There was a period when major travel agencies wouldn't deal with them, but they built relationships with travel agencies through

effort and sales. It was also Hideyuki who decided to dig for hot springs in Lake Towada around 2005. There was the tailwind of the bubble economy, but they took a huge hit from the Lehman Shock, the Great East Japan Earthquake, and COVID-19. Why did Towadaso survive while large hotels went bankrupt? "In the past, a travel agency made reservations with us because Towada Kanko Hotel didn't have enough rooms, but they told us to match the meals to Kanko Hotel. When I asked what I should do, they said, 'Go ask them yourself.' It was terrible. I was frustrated and wanted to do something about it. Also, Lake Towada is a lake, after all. We couldn't see the lake, and originally, it was a second-rate land full of bushes. Maybe we were able to work hard because of such adverse conditions. Besides, it was our own land, so we could do as we pleased."

Toward a Town That Sustains Together with the Tourist Destination Lake Towada

For example, using the old Towadako Elementary School as a himemasu farm; making Taiyo Hiroba (Sun Square) available for camping; opening more shops in Ichinomiya, even if small... Hideyuki says they should come up with various ideas and give them shape.

"I just said what popped into my mind now. My head is already stiff. A change of perspective is also important. I want young people who can think flexibly to work harder and harder. Isn't it fine to hand over the bank seal to the next generation



1 President Nakamura accepted the interview while looking at materials for the Kunizakai Matsuri, a major event in Lake Towada where festivals of Northern Tohoku gather together. 2 Exterior of Towadaso. The accommodation facility with the largest capacity in Lake Towada. A stone monument with a poem by Takuboku Ishikawa engraved on it remains next to the "Towadaso" sign.

early and let them do it freely? Even when digging the hot spring, the government told me various things, but you don't know unless you dig. Anyway, you have to try."

We asked him, as the chairman of the Lake Towada National Park Association, how he thinks Lake Towada should be in the future.

"In another 40 years, I will be dead and not in this world. The surrounding fishermen and shops might be the same. However, even in such a situation, Lake Towada and Oirase will remain—unless the Towada volcano erupts. That is the only unchanging fact, and it is one of Japan's leading tourist destinations that can be called a national asset. Since a tourist destination is a place to work and generate money, of course, it's fine to have various businesses, but I want them to think deeply so that it can be sustained."

He says that in the past, the ownership of a certain hotel changed continuously and passed into the hands of untrustworthy people. In the end, it turned into ruins. Hideyuki says that when he was young, he would catch frogs and snakes in the mountains and collect them in oil drums, or he would swim at Uranaiba (said to be the most sacred place in Lake Towada) and pick up offertory coins. The area around the shrine was naturally his playground. For 60 years, the nature of Lake Towada reflected in Hideyuki's eyes has not changed, but the negative legacy newly created by human hands certainly remains.

"Regarding the ruins of the Kanko Hotel, personally, I don't think anything is needed. A very good view spreads out with great visibility, so I think just maintaining it with a little effort would be fine. If any business is to be done, I want someone with financial strength to come and do it continuously."

Viewing the Light of Lake Towada

Deputy Secretary General and General Manager of Regional Management Department, Towada Oirase Tourism Organization

Iwao Ando

Profile
Born in 1987 in Tokamachi, Niigata Prefecture. Worked at a publishing company as an editor for 7 years. After serving as a usage planning officer for the Ministry of the Environment, he moved to the strategy execution field for regional tourism.

Tourism for Giving Back

It will be a full nine years in April 2025 since Iwao Ando started living in Lake Towada. The trigger was being hired for the Ministry of the Environment's National Park Enjoyment Project.

His previous job was magazine editor. Ando, who covered more than 200 local spots across Japan, from Hokkaido to Okinawa, said he was particularly curious about Northern Tohoku. He was vaguely attracted to the perseverance of continuing to place oneself in a harsh environment without pretension; the simple



character of the people; and regional characteristics, such as Jomon and Emishi history. At that time, he found a job opening where he could be based in Lake Towada. It was not a city but the hinterland of Northern Tohoku, a place that is ultra-local.

"I had always wanted to be involved in the tourism industry because of my experience traveling as a student. I cycled around unknown local spots around the world, and I had many opportunities to be taken care of by the people of the land. They invited me, a stranger meeting them for the first time, to meals and even let me stay at their homes. While traveling, I feel like I was taught that the treasure of a region is the people living there. When I thought about how I could repay the people I met around the world, I thought it was to convey the charm of Japan. But gradually, the desire to not just convey but to create charm and receive guests became stronger."

During his time at the Ministry of the Environment, as a National Park Usage Planning Officer, he engaged in renovating exhibits at various usage facilities in Towada-Hachimantai National Park; addressing over-tourism measures at Tsutanuma Pond, which had become famous for its autumn foliage views, causing street parking and observation deck overflow; and oversaw the Mixed Bathing Project, which thinks about how to preserve the toji and mixed-bathing culture. After finishing his 5-year term, he moved to the current DMO and finally proceeded to the core of community development.

"Over the 5 years, I became a familiar face to the townspeople, and I was happy when they called out to me saying 'it got better' when I changed something, even if it was small. Even after my term ended, I still wanted to do more in this place."

1 On the second floor of Ando's workplace, Towadako Tourism Exchange Center Plat, there is a permanent exhibition of the three great figures involved in the movement to make Lake Towada a National Park—Keigetsu Omachi, Chiyoasaburo Takeda, Koichi Ogasawara—and Kotaro Takamura who created the Statue of Maidens. 2 Dispatch sales by the Michi-no-Eki are scheduled once a month (as of March 2025). Local people say, "Leafy vegetables spoil quickly and can't be frozen, so this helps."



Steersman in a Tourist Destination

Ando taught us an African proverb: "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."

"I might have been able to do work related to tourism by myself. But I thought there are things that can be done precisely because I am in an organization where people gather. What I want to do is to make this entire region of Lake Towada sustainable—not transient events, but I want to be involved in the output of community building while doing tourism.... I thought a regional DMO could fulfill that role."

Since before Ando joined, the evaluation of the DMO organization by local residents has been mixed with praise and criticism; how will he dispel that and gain the region's trust?

"First, to listen firmly to the voices of the residents and businesses that we are here to work with. Business in the region cannot ignore the past, and the past is packed with the thoughts of the local residents. It might be an era where there is no future in the extension of the past, but you cannot create a future without knowing the past. As an initiative to conduct community building citywide using tourism as a means, I want to create a virtuous cycle within the region—creating and selling travel products utilizing materials in the region, digital support, sustainable support, inbound support. Member support is also important to make them function well and take root."

The DMO is the designated manager of the Towadako Tourism Exchange Center Plat. Currently, they are also conducting initiatives to open that base to tourists and the region.

"Lake Towada is remote, and it takes an hour to go to the nearest supermarket. I enjoy that as leisure, too, but it doesn't work that way for elderly people. Also, vendors coming in are decreasing, so I thought it would be good if they could come to the Michi-no-Eki (roadside station) so businesses and residents could buy local vegetables even a few times a month. So, we started the Plat Friday Market."

Ando says he wants to contribute to the safety net of local people whose faces he knows, little by little, starting from what he can shape. And he wants to create a mechanism where people visiting Lake Towada pay an appropriate price with respect for the nature, culture, and people of this region, which is returned to the region, including surrounding areas, making the tourist destination earn properly and have ripple effects.

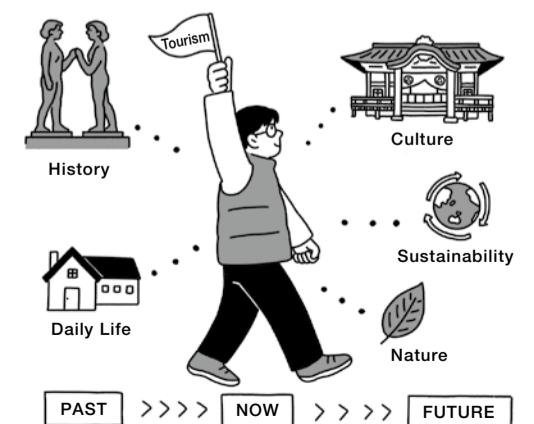
"The population decline in this region is really severe. The population has become 1/3 in 25 years. There is no agriculture or large factories in Lake Towada, so I believe tourism is the only means to sustain the region, but I also feel it won't last at this rate. If there are no people living here, infrastructure like roads and water

cannot be maintained. That's why I want to make it a region that can earn properly and improve income. If you can enjoy this beautiful forest and lake scenery every day and have a high income, you'd want to live here, right? (Laughs)"

In the future, he wants to convey the charm of the off-season as well. The winter canoeing by Towadako Guidehouse Kai and the winter sauna by Nature Sense Institute are good examples.

"There is no superiority or inferiority in spring, summer, autumn, and winter, the 365 days, but now tourism is inevitably concentrating toward summer vacation and the autumn foliage season. If seasonal fluctuation is large, regular employment is not possible. If the number of businesses that don't think of the off-season as an "off" increases and horizontal cooperation is formed, I think it will start to change although issues like labor shortage and securing public transport are also large."

The original meaning of kanko, the Japanese word for "tourism," was "viewing the light of the country." The light of Towada and Oirase will probably continue forever. But if there are no people there, the light cannot be viewed. Ando's tourism community building is still just beginning.





Three daughters of Kazunari and Yoko Morita, who runs Local gift and Local cuisine MORITA (P10). From left: eldest daughter, Mayu (12); second daughter, Hina (11); third daughter, Sae (9). Skipping stones using ice in a puddle in front of Towada Shrine. Their imagination is amazing!

The Way of Life in a Tourist Destination

Local gift and Local cuisine MORITA

Yoko Morita

Profile

Born in 1983 in Fujieda, Shizuoka Prefecture. Worked in Lake Towada for 4 years as an active ranger for the Ministry of the Environment. After marriage, gave birth to 3 daughters. Balances child-rearing and work.

Days of Nurturing a Connection with Lake Towada

Walking along the stone pavement leading to Towada Shrine, one can see scattered shops selling Tohoku souvenir products and cafeterias serving Lake Towada himemasu and kiritanpo. According to Towada Annai Ryakki (Towada Hoshokai), the shops lining the approach already included several facilities, such as Towadakan, where worshippers could stay in 1913 (Taisho 2).

Local gift and Local cuisine MORITA, located at the very back of the approach in front of the torii gate of Towada Shrine, has continued business as a souvenir shop since 1931 (business started in Yasumiya in 1926). A view of the third generation, the couple Kazunari and Yoko Morita, and his mother, Reiko, standing in the shop while the three elementary school sisters run around energetically in front of the shop is very heartwarming.

Yoko, who raises three sisters while working at Morita, is from Shizuoka Prefecture. Influenced by her mother, who liked mountain climbing, she had many opportunities to touch nature, such as climbing Mt. Fuji with her family and going to see the Jomon Cedar in Yakushima (Yoko is also the eldest of three sisters). Admiring the guides who guided them there, she vaguely thought she wanted a job involving nature in the future. After graduating from high school, she went on to the Department of Biological Environment Science at Akita Prefectural University. During her student days, she also commuted to the Lake Towada area to research Chishima-zasa, a species of bamboo known as nemagari-dake in this area.

"I ate bento at the gazebo on Kogakudai and stayed at the Nishikohan Yamanoie. At first, I only saw Lake Towada as a research subject."

When deciding on a job, she prioritized a place where she could be involved with nature. Her academic advisor introduced her to the recruitment of active rangers (the Ministry of the Environment's local employment quota), and she applied.

"I was in the first batch of active rangers. Shirakami-Sanchi was my first choice, but looking at my experience, it had to be Lake Towada (laughs). At that time, I was allowed to experience various things, like patrolling Tsuta, park volunteer activities, extermination of alien species, and mountain trail maintenance, although I think it was fumbling since we were the first batch. After getting the job, I gradually started to want to touch the depth of nature. My family also came from Shizuoka many times to visit back then. It was around this time that I realized this is a place that can be a destination and that I am living in impossible wilderness, not because of



① When I asked to photograph the three sisters playing, Grandma Reiko took the lead, saying, "It's Chanbara (sword fighting)!" There is also a preference for branches used for Chanbara. ② Lake Towada burning bright red, photographed by the children. The daily life of three sisters growing up in beautiful scenery.

work, but I started to purely want to climb mountains or take photos. But around the time I got used to the 2-hour round trip for shopping, I went out thinking, 'I absolutely must buy winter tires today,' but forgot my wallet and traveled 2 round trips, 4 hours; that really beat me (laughs)."

During her active-ranger days, she also belonged to the Nature Guide Club, which guided Lake Towada early in the morning. It gave her a place where she could share what she found interesting and wanted to convey with guests.

"Although there were times I thought I couldn't guide well, I felt a strong sense of fulfillment when the tour ended. In the autumn foliage season, the moment the morning sun hits the opposite bank in the dim light and dyes it bright red is very beautiful." When she was thinking of returning to Shizuoka after serving as an active ranger for 4 years, she was asked if she wanted to work as a tourism concierge in Yasumiya.

"Thinking about it now, it's strange. At that time, I was living in the Utarube district, and I wasn't thinking of my next job being in Lake Towada, but my connection with Lake Towada didn't break."

Lake Towada as a Place to Live

In 2011, she married Kazunari Morita, whom she met at the Nature Guide Club (wedding reception was at Towadaso, P6), and was blessed with three children, Mayu (12), Hina (10), and Sae, (9), who look just like Yoko. They seem almost like four sisters.

"The shop is busy, and I may not have been able to take enough time with the children, but I think Lake Towada is a very good natural environment for raising children. Anywhere becomes a playground."

Picking mountain vegetables in spring, catching smelt in early summer. In school classes, they experience canoeing, SUP, himemasu seine fishing, and egg collection.

This is an education unique to Lake Towada. However, the current number of children at Towadako Elementary and Junior High School is 7 (of whom 1 is a junior high student). It is definitely decreasing amidst depopulation. From nursery school to Towadako Elementary and Junior High School, they are barely holding on with a few toddlers and pupils.

"Of course, we are very grateful that they pay close attention to each student. However, my third daughter, Sae, might become the only student if the situation continues like this. I really want her to attend the school in Lake Towada until graduation, but I think being the only one is a bit hard, so I am also considering transferring. But I also have the feeling of wanting to leave hope for those who follow, so I am really torn."

Yoko hopes that the Lake Towada region will be easy to live in for the child-rearing generation as well.

"I want to preserve this scenery that moves anyone who comes, and I want to make it a place where children want to come back. It would be good if it becomes an environment where you can have your own livelihood and raise children without anxiety." Lake Towada is a tourist destination, but at the same time, it is a place of "living" for the people working there.

"At the end of last year, I had a chance to go to Tokyo with my second daughter, Hina. While walking in the city, she told me, 'That tree is split into three. It's a tree where God dwells, so you mustn't cut it.' I was surprised that she was focusing on trees even amidst all the information in Tokyo. She really is a child raised in Lake Towada. When the sunset is beautiful, she runs out to the lake, saying, 'I want to go take a picture,' but she sees this scenery as everyday life."

Yoko says she has things she still wants to do here once child-rearing settles down. Watching Reiko convey things about Lake Towada to tourists and Kazunari investigate ancient paths and history, Yoko says she wants to absorb information so she can transmit something. She says that in her 20s she couldn't imagine living in Lake Towada forever, but now it has become a place to return to even if she leaves.



Conveying the Moment When Scenery and Faith Become One



Awakening to Lake Towada after 20 Years

Nakagawa recalls that when he began working at Takasago-ya 20 years ago, he did not know a single name of the trees or flowers growing wild in Lake Towada.

"I was too busy to notice anything at all," he says with a laugh. In the midst of that, Kazunari, the eldest son of Local gift and Local cuisine MORITA in front of the shrine, invited me to join the Lake Towada Nature Guide Club. I started like a casual side job driven by curiosity. It was an early morning volunteer guide, and at first, I merely followed along, learning from a senior guide, Akiko Yoshizaki. Still, when I saw that the visitors enjoyed themselves, I felt genuinely happy. Until then, I had been so busy that people who came to the shop were little more than customers who bought something and left. That was why the experience felt so refreshing, being thanked again and again."

After two years of training as a guide, he finally started guiding alone in his third year.

"Once I started remembering names like kikuzakichige (Anemone pseudoaltaica) and beech trees,

everything gradually became more fun."

Because the nature guide course passed in front of the shrine, he became interested in learning more about the shrine, such as its origins. Beginning his research with Kazunari Morita, who had first invited him, he also met Professor Toshio Saito of Hirosaki University, a researcher of Towada belief, through the Aomori Prefecture Kamikita Regional Bureau.

"At first, I thought I would research just the origin of the shrine," he reflects, "yet as I met more people, my curiosity led me ever deeper into a world including belief, ancient paths, and history. Honestly, I never expected it to expand this much."

Although Lake Towada was developed by Shinbei Kuriyama in the Meiji period, its significance as a sacred site stretches back much further. Situated 400 meters above sea level and surrounded by vast natural landscapes, the lake served as a focus for nature worship. During the Heian period, Buddhist teachings were brought to the area, and Lake Towada became a site for Shugendō practice, where many ascetic practitioners are said to have trained. From the Edo period, the number of general pilgrims grew, and the center of faith became Towada Shrine. (Before the separation of Shinto and Buddhism in the early Meiji period, it was a temple known as Towanji Temple.)

"By knowing the faith and history, Lake Towada started to look different. Gratitude and awe toward nature... the beauty of the moment when faith and nature become a set is exceptional. When you live here, there are times you see amazing scenery, right? Like the color of the Nakanoumi or the color of the sky. I want to convey this sensation to the people who come."

There are many ancient paths leading to Lake Towada from more than 300 years ago, and various legends and histories remain. It is said that the birthplace of Nansobo, the legendary high priest who opened Lake Towada, and the temple that was his base for training are on the Gonohe-guchi path, the main pilgrimage route. "They purposely built roads with their own hands, and everyone aimed for this place. That's amazing. I want people to know deeply about Lake Towada including such backgrounds, and I hope I can create a trigger for them to like it. If we continue that, maybe the bustle will return to Lake Towada again..."

Nakagawa told us that guides exist to make customers happy, to provide hospitality in Lake Towada.

"Hakka Pass, which moved me the first time I saw it, is also one of the ancient paths. It was also a place of worship from afar (Yohai-jo). What I can see has changed from 30 years ago. Perhaps now I can take a photo that is more than a picture postcard—something that really moves someone (laughs)."



Chairman, Lake Towada Nature Guide Club / Staff,
Towada Visitor Center

Kazuki Nakagawa

Profile

Born in Komae, Tokyo, in 1971. After graduating from high school, a stroke of good fortune led him to relocate to Lake Towada. After working at Takasago-ya, he currently serves as a staff member at the Towada Visitor Center.

The Reason for Relocating to Lake Towada Was People

"I was moved when I first saw Lake Towada from Hakka Pass." Nakagawa left Komae, Tokyo, where he was born and raised, and moved to Towada when he was just 20 years old. His first view of Lake Towada was from Hakka Pass.

After graduating from high school, Nakagawa began working in the construction industry. At one site, he met Koji Nomura, who came from Lake Towada to work there only during the winter. When they went to karaoke, Nomura would sing Joji Yamamoto's "Oirase" with tears streaming down his face. As Nakagawa listened to Nomura's stories, Nakagawa gradually started to take an interest in Lake Towada. He was introduced to Takasago-ya by Nomura, thinking that his hobby of photography could be useful, and started working on a short-term basis at first. Takasago-ya had operated a photo studio already at that point.

"Every day was just taking endless group photos for tourists. It was the autumn foliage season, with no moment to catch my breath." There was no time to enjoy photography, and his time at Lake Towada flew by. He began with a dual-base lifestyle, spending spring and autumn at Lake Towada and winters in Tokyo. When he returned to Tokyo, strangely, he would recall the faces of the people he had met in Lake Towada. Because it was a tourist destination, everyone welcomed him warmly. The people were full of character, and their communication felt fresh to Nakagawa, who grew up in Tokyo.

"At some point, it wasn't so much that I wanted to take photos. I just honestly found myself wanting to go to Lake Towada. By then, I had already started to feel the limits of my own photography. All I could take were postcard-like pictures. After that, I began working permanently at Takasago-ya, but it was incredibly busy. I hardly had any time to truly face Lake Towada. But after work, we gathered to build snow sculptures for the winter festival, then had yakiniku and drinks during breaks. It was really fun. Above all, it was the people who left the deepest impression—staff from JR, crews from the sightseeing boats, and the touting shop manager. Of course, after 30 years, I've noticed some of the downsides, but although it might sound a bit much, the people of Yasumiya and Yasumitai feel like family, which may explain why I've been able to accept it all."

① Towada Shrine Worship Hall. Further up, Seiryu Daigongen (Nansobo) is enshrined. During the New Year holidays, people visiting for hatsumode form a line. ② Nakagawa picked up and showed us a sawagurumi (Japanese Wingnut) seed that had fallen. Winter walks become even more fun with a guide.





A Place Where Nature and People Sustain Each Other, Weaving the Fabric of Daily Life



Deep into the Mysterious Lake, Finally Reached After Crossing the Pass



1. Ota preparing for a winter canoe tour (P4). 2. Ogasawa feeding himemasu fry (P5). 3. Monthly sales event by the Michi-no-Eki. 4. Lake Towada is not just about wild animals. 5. Ando taking a break (P7). 6. Michi-no-Eki Towadako keeps the entire facility warm with firewood (P14). 7. The Morita family all together. Everyone has a great smile (P10).

1 | 2
3 | 4
5 | 6
7

1
2
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1. A clear winter day, when one can see Hakkoda beyond the outer rim. 2. The symbol of Lake Towada, the Statue of Maidens, is the last work of Kotaro Takamura. 3. Shopping street in Yasumiya. If one proceeds to the back, they will find Towada Shrine. 4. There are many inbound tourists in winter.



A Small Light Illuminating Lake Towada

Representative, Shikajirushi LLC /
Station Manager, Michi-no-Eki Towadako

Mikiko Shibata

Profile

Born in 1974 in Nagoya, Aichi Prefecture. After working at a local company, she married Kazuhiro and relocated to Akita with him and their three daughters, the eldest two of whom are twins.

CEO, Shibata Shoten Co., Ltd. /
Operations Manager, Michi-no-Eki Towadako

Kazuhiro Shibata

Profile

Born in 1975 in Kazuno, Akita Prefecture. He worked for a major supermarket in the Tokai region, where he met his wife, Mikiko. In 2003, he returned to Akita to help with the family business.



Restarting in a Place Where He “Had No Intention of Returning”

One evening in December 2024, a man stopped by Michi-no-Eki Towadako. “I was relieved just to see the lights and have a warm place,” he told Mikiko Shibata, the Michi-no-Eki manager. He said he returns to Lake Towada every year in winter.

Michi-no-Eki Towadako opened in October 2024. As part of the National Park Enjoyment Project, the Ministry of the Environment, Akita Prefecture, and Kosaka Town worked together to develop the tourism hub in the Wainai area, marking the initiative’s launch. Whereas nearly all businesses in the Lake Towada area close during the winter—except for the 27-year-old Towada Lake Winter Story festival—Michi-no-Eki Towadako operates year-round. The facility is run by Shikajirushi LLC, a company that Mikiko Shibata and her husband, Kazuhiro, manage.

“I never thought I would return to my hometown,” says Kazuhiro. Inspired by an elementary school teacher, he had dreamed of becoming a teacher. However, after not passing the teacher employment examination twice, he gave up on that dream and decided to work at a major supermarket in the Tokai region, where he met his wife, Mikiko. While he was working in various regions, such as Wakayama, Nagano, and Toyama, due to transfers, they were blessed with three children. Just as he was aiming to work overseas, his father asked him to help with the family business. Kazuhiro’s family runs Shibata Shoten Co., Ltd., which operates a shop at the Hakka Pass Observatory and a local product shop for Kosaka Town. Although he initially declined, he eventually decided to return when his father insisted.

“I had never visited the Tohoku region. My youngest child had just started crawling, so I felt some anxiety, but I came here believing that things would work out as they should,” says Mikiko.

Because their wedding was in Nagoya, they held a wedding reception when they returned to Akita. The venue was the Towada Prince Hotel, overlooking the lake. Surrounded by the stunning scenery, Mikiko was deeply moved by the vast natural landscape before her.

“But the liveliness of the time I was here was gone. There were many abandoned buildings, and it felt a bit sad. When I was a junior high school student, Lake Towada had a city-like vibe, and it was a period when any business would thrive. I remember being called to the shop at the Hakka Pass and just kept making shaved ice endlessly.”

When 20 years had passed since they returned to Akita and the family business and raising their children had settled down, the couple felt ready to pursue new challenges in the next chapter of their lives. Discovering that Michi-no-Eki Towadako was set to open, they established a company in October 2023 and applied to become the designated manager.



The Past Cannot Be Restored, So We Do What We Can Now

“Honestly, I think running a business here is tough. Especially since we remain open during the quiet winter season, many people worry about us. But there are positive customers, who say they appreciate the opportunity to enjoy nature at a leisurely pace when there are fewer people,” says Kazuhiro.

“Even if we try our best, I don’t think we can bring back the vibrancy of the past, but although the numbers of visitors may have decreased, there are still people who want to walk in the national park or come to see Lake Towada. I want to leave a positive impression on all visitors,” Mikiko says.

They know they are not the only ones facing difficulties, and they know they must accept everything and just give it a try. The couple’s determination is firm—they want to be able to look back and feel that what they are doing now has been worthwhile, even just a little.

“My friends often tell me that I bounce back quickly,” Mikiko laughs. People can have a meal, drink tea, or even just use the restroom—the space is meant to be used as customers like. I want it to be a comfortable place for everyone. I don’t think being lively is everything,” says Mikiko.

The couple is grateful for the help of their staff. Staff at Michi-no-Eki Towadako primarily consists of young people in their teens or twenties. They have a strong connection to Lake Towada and help fill in the couple’s knowledge gaps.

“Just this encounter makes me feel glad to be involved with Michi-no-Eki,” states Mikiko.

A small light has begun to shine in Wainai, a crossroads on Lake Towada, where staff members and guests also cross their paths.

Kazuhiro’s grandfather, Otokichi, opened a shop at Hakka Pass in Lake Towada because he wished for a quiet place to read—a time when people still traveled to Lake Towada by horse. In a sense, Michi-no-Eki Towadako might be returning to Otokichi’s vision—a calm space that warmly accepts all.

“People often ask me, ‘Which season is the best?’ But the nature of Lake Towada is not something artificial, but its beauty has been here all along. So I always tell them, ‘Anytime is a good time to visit.’”

Kazuhiro and Mikiko wish the site to be a tourist destination where every visitor can find their own enjoyment while protecting the environment.



① Michi-no-Eki Towadako has the Lake Towada Himemasu Village Exhibition Room, where visitors can learn about the history of the himemasu hatchery. ② The Kosaka-machi katsu ramen is a specialty of Kosaka and is made with locally sourced Momobuta pork. It is said to have been conceived over 50 years ago in preparations for the town’s Tanabata Festival. ③ Mikiko chatting with a staff member in their 20s; they have been working together since the opening.

Reimagining Tourism Across the Entire Region

General Manager, Towada Prince Hotel

Mitsuaki Sue

Profile

Born in 1968 in Kakunodate Town, Akita Prefecture. During his school days, he dedicated himself to sports, such as swimming and alpine skiing. After graduating from high school, he began his career at Prince Hotels in 1986, where he has continued to work for 39 years.



① Lake Towada French Course, the dinner course served at Towada Prince Hotel, features an abundance of ingredients from northern Tohoku, including the famous Towada Lake himemasu. ② Towada Prince Hotel sits right next to the lake. “In certain seasons, you can enjoy dinner while watching the moonlight create a path across the water,” says Sue. ③ The Nishikohan walking path lets people experience the tranquility of being surrounded by forest and lake.

Opposite Shore of Yasumiya Scenery from the Nishikohan (West Shore)

“I think the sight of the sunrise right in front and the morning mist drifting over the lake is something unique to Nishikohan,” says Mitsuaki Sue, general manager of Towada Prince Hotel.

Lake Towada stretches across two prefectures: about 60% of its eastern side is in Aomori, and the western 40% falls within Akita. The Yasumiya area in Aomori Prefecture, with famous spots such as Towada Shrine and the Statue of Maidens, attracts many tourists and hosts events, such as the Lake Towada Festival in summer and the Lake Towada Winter Story. Meanwhile, the west side, where Towada Prince Hotel and Towada Hotel are located, features a 5-kilometer walking trail along the forest and lake, offering visitors a more relaxed atmosphere.

Prince Hotel, part of the Seibu Group, operates over 80 hotels in Japan and abroad, building decades of history and experience. The company has a series of hotels located by lakes such as Lake Biwa and Lake Kussharo. Opened in 1977, Towada Prince Hotel is among the oldest currently operating lakeside series. It is the only accommodation directly facing Towada Lake (excluding campgrounds), featuring a 7,000-square-meter private garden with panoramic lake views.

“I was assigned here in 2012, the year after the Great East Japan Earthquake. Compared to before, the area was much quieter with fewer people, and I felt a sense of loneliness. Since my hometown is Kakunodate, I had visited Lake Towada many times, sometimes just for a drive.”

Sue was assigned to Lake Towada after working at Tazawa Lake in Akita, Shizukuishi in Iwate, and the head office in Tokyo.

“Even so, the beautiful nature remained unchanged. Lake Towada and Oirase Gorge are recognized as Special Places of Scenic Beauty and Natural Monuments of Japan. Here, truly exceptional nature exists.”

As a manager of the Sales Department, he handled sales to travel agencies as well as organized bridal events and lunch buffets. He was particularly eager to attract visitors—even for day visits—to familiarize them with the hotel. Talking with local residents, he found that surprisingly many had never visited the Towada Prince Hotel.

“About 10 years ago, we offered an early-morning cruise before breakfast only for about a month during summer vacation. It was a wonderful experience.”

A New Vision for Tourism Born from Connecting Lake Towada

“Having grown up in a snowy region, I did alpine skiing and I was used to snow. I never thought of it negatively. But when I was assigned to Lake Towada and visited in winter for preparations, I remember feeling very lonely along with recognizing its beauty, yet it was that lonely winter that made me appreciate how vibrant the greenery is in spring. It is scenery that can only be appreciated because we have been eagerly awaiting spring. The gradient of green after Golden Week in May makes me energetic. This is what Lake Towada taught me.”

Currently, Towada Prince Hotel operates only from spring to autumn, closing during the winter months, when it is snowbound. In previous winters, Sue has been engaged in maintenance and patrol at the group’s ski resorts, and in recent years, he has taken part in hotel operations at multiple sites, including Naeba.

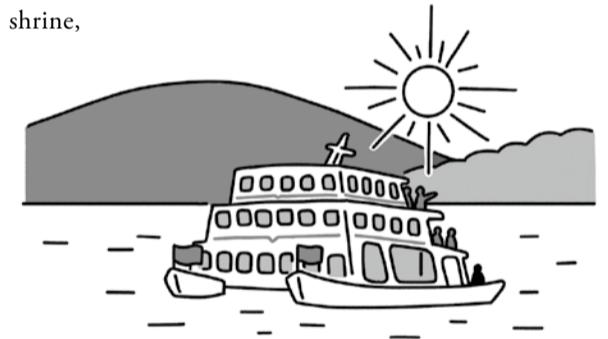
“Thankfully, seasonal employees enjoy working here, and they return every year. I think the location itself has a lot to do with it.” He seems to spend fulfilling time outside of work as well, jogging and walking.

Although Lake Towada has a severe difference between busy and quiet seasons and seasonal employment is often considered unstable, Sue says that he has been fortunate with his staff, which has allowed him to continue operations. Even considering the employment aspect, running the hotel year-round would be ideal, but it is not feasible under current conditions. The building’s structure, road closures during winter that disrupt transportation, and above all the lack of public transportation are major factors preventing operation throughout the year.

“Since the guests have taken time to come all the way here to Lake Towada, I hope they enjoy a long, leisurely stay. Towada Prince Hotel attracts a diverse range of visitors, including elderly couples, solo travelers, and families across three generations. Many guests enjoy a leisurely stay at the hotel. While we offer several activities, such as early morning walks, there are limits to what a single hotel can provide. I believe a key challenge is to develop a system that connects with other areas, such as Yasumiya and Oirase, for regional tours and to find ways to add value to this natural environment.”

Sue says he wants to help revitalize the whole region. “Lake Towada is a place that offers valuable insights, and I have come to love this place over the past twelve years.”

How about experiencing Lake Towada this way? After staying overnight on the west lake shore (Nishikohan), start the morning with a walk at sunrise. Take the regional bus from the Michi-no-Eki to Yasumiya. After visiting the shrine, enjoy a beer at sunset while interacting with locals and tourists. How do you spend your time in this special natural environment? Exploring various areas brings out even more of Lake Towada’s charm.



Bringing you the latest from Japan's national parks!

NEWSLETTER

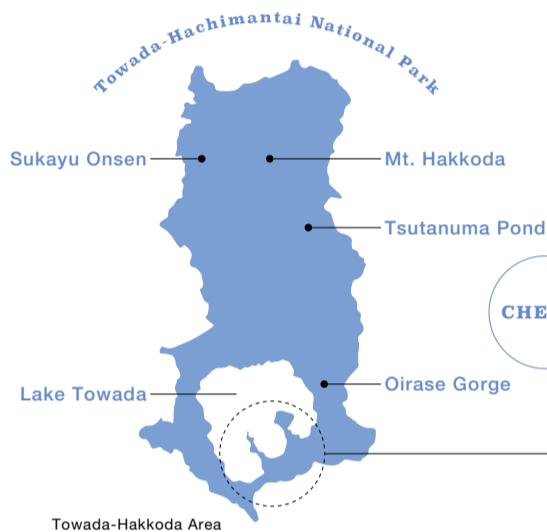


Towada Note is set in Towada-Hachimantai National Park. Along the shores of Lake Towada sits a local office of the Ministry of the Environment, which is responsible for managing the national park. This newsletter shares a message from that office.

1 What is a National Park in the first place?

We often hear the words “national park,” but what does an area being designated as a national park actually mean? What does “utilization” of a national park mean—besides simply conserving?

National Parks are designated based on the Natural Parks Act. The law specifies that these areas must be “distinguished enough to represent the scenery of Japan.” To preserve this landscape, conservation measures are put in place to regulate buildings and advertisements. At the same time, national parks aim to balance this with utilization—the systematic development of facilities for visitors, such as roads, footpaths, accommodations, restaurants, and souvenir shops.



CHECK!

The Towada-Hachimantai National Park Lake Towada Area is a Model Region Across Japan!
With the rise in inbound tourism, efforts are underway to promote high-value, immersive stays centered on the inspiring natural experiences national parks offer. Lake Towada has been selected as the first advanced model project to enhance the overall appeal of its visitor hub areas, centered on accommodations!

2 Living with the National Park

National parks are places where conservation and utilization are pursued. So what exactly is prohibited in a national park?

LIFE_1

Even picking up fallen leaves is prohibited in the Special Protection Zone!



In national parks, the level of protection varies. In the most strictly regulated Special Protection Zone—such as the Oirase Gorge and the Nakayama/Ogura peninsulas—the collection of not only living plants but even of fallen leaves and fallen branches is restricted! This reflects the idea that fallen leaves are also an important part of the landscape.

LIFE_2

Can you really feel nature if it's crowded?



Although visitors hope to enjoy nature slowly and peacefully, the exceptional autumn scenery attracts large numbers of tourists. At Tsutanuma Pond, where heavy congestion occurred in autumn, a reservation system was introduced to ensure visitors could view the landscape more comfortably. Overtourism countermeasures are gradually beginning to take root in this region.

LIFE_3

Don't stand out, buildings! Keep the colors calm and unified.



One reason national parks may feel distinctive is that the buildings all look similar. Roofs must be dark brown, with either a gabled or hipped design. Exterior walls may vary from beige to brown, but bright colors, such as red, blue, and yellow, are not allowed. In a national park, where nature is the main attraction, buildings must not dominate the landscape.

LIFE_4

Toji and Mixed Bathing: The National Park's Unique Identity



Many old hot-spring inns for toji (therapeutic bathing) remain in Towada-Hachimantai National Park, some of which feature mixed baths. There is a growing recognition that the landscapes national parks ought to protect include cultural landscapes. The region's unique hot spring culture is one of the landscapes that we hope to preserve and share into the future as part of the national park.

Towada Note

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