

Mount Bandai viewed
over Lake Hibara
Photo: Courtesy of Urabandai
Tourism Association

Stories of the Volcano and the People

At Mount Bandai Geopark in Fukushima Prefecture, a collection of “stories” about a volcano explains how nature as a dynamic force connects with people’s everyday lives.

SATOSHI UMEZAWA

THE Aizu region in the western part of Fukushima Prefecture is home to scenic landscapes of lush green mountains, clear flowing rivers, and a variety of lakes and marshes surrounded by forests. Mount Bandai (Bandai-san), an active volcano whose highest peak is 1,816 meters above sea level, has been a symbol of the Aizu region since ancient times.

The Mount Bandai volcano first became active around 700,000 years ago, and tens of thousands of years ago a large-scale collapse occurred at the southwestern side of the mountain, triggering a rock avalanche over a wide area. The shape we see today was formed by an eruption caused by a steam explosion in 1888, resulting in a large-scale collapse of the northern slope. The ensuing rock avalanche flow dammed up the rivers, creating numerous lakes and marshes in the vicinity of Mount Bandai, including Lake Hibara and the Goshiki-numa lakes. Like so

many landscapes of scenic beauty the world over, the scenic landscapes of this area came into being as a result of the dynamic workings of the earth.

The area surrounding Mount Bandai was designated as a Geopark by the Japanese Geoparks Committee in 2011. Geoparks are large areas of land that include many geoheritage sites of geological and topographical significance. Each Japanese Geopark protects and utilizes these sites for educational purposes, as well as conducts geotourism (tourism focusing on geological and topographical ecosystems as well as the region’s history, traditions and culture) with the aim of ensuring the sustainable development of the region. Mount Bandai is one of forty-four Geoparks in Japan.

Makoto Hasuoka of the Mount Bandai Geopark Council Secretariat explains the appeal of Mount Bandai Geopark.

“The sites in Geoparks that show us the origins of the earth are called ‘geosites.’ Mount Bandai Geopark has seventy-three geosites, and we have linked these geosites to five stories to make the features of the



Aka-numa (left), the “Red Pond,” and Ao-numa (right), the “Blue Pond,” in the Goshiki-numa cluster of five colored ponds
 Photos: Courtesy of Urabandai Tourism Association

Geopark easier for visitors to understand.”

The five stories are “The story of the eruption of 1888,” “The story of faith rooted in the foothills of Mount Bandai,” “The story of swamps and wetlands,” “The story of the eruption 50,000 years ago,” and “The story panoramically describing the creation of the earth.” Guidebooks to the area are also available, and by visiting the various geosites associated with the stories, visitors are able to feel the connection between the topography formation and ecosystems, and people’s everyday lives.

Mount Bandai has had both a positive and negative influence on the surrounding area. For example, the Bandai-machi area at the southwest foot of Mount Bandai was not affected by volcanic eruption, and an abundance of agricultural produce using the plentiful underground water has been cultivated there. On the other hand, in Kitashiobara village and some parts of Inawashiro town, debris and blasts from the 1888 eruption resulted in 477 fatalities. Hasuoka expresses a desire to communicate both the positive influence and cruelty of the volcano through the activities of the Geopark.

“In the Nagasaka district of Inawashiro, eighty-six people perished in 1888 when they were swept away by a mud flow. However, the surviving villagers cooperated with each other, working all out to restore the damage. Today, the village is still a close-knit community, carrying on the legacy of their

ancestors. It is our job to share such ‘Stories of the Volcano and the People’ around the region and convey them to those who visit the Geopark.”

Hasuoka feels that the Geopark not only has value for understanding the earth as a living planet through geology and topography, but that it also helps to connect those living in the region.

“Traditionally, local governments have been the main players in tourism promotion and the utilization of local resources. Geoparks have the power to connect the dots to create a broader picture. Through the Mount Bandai Geopark, I would like to further enhance the appeal of this region by raising and expanding awareness among local people of their connection with Mount Bandai.”



Makoto Hasuoka of the Mount Bandai Geopark Council Secretariat with a party of schoolchildren
 Photo: Courtesy of Mt.Bandai Geopark Council