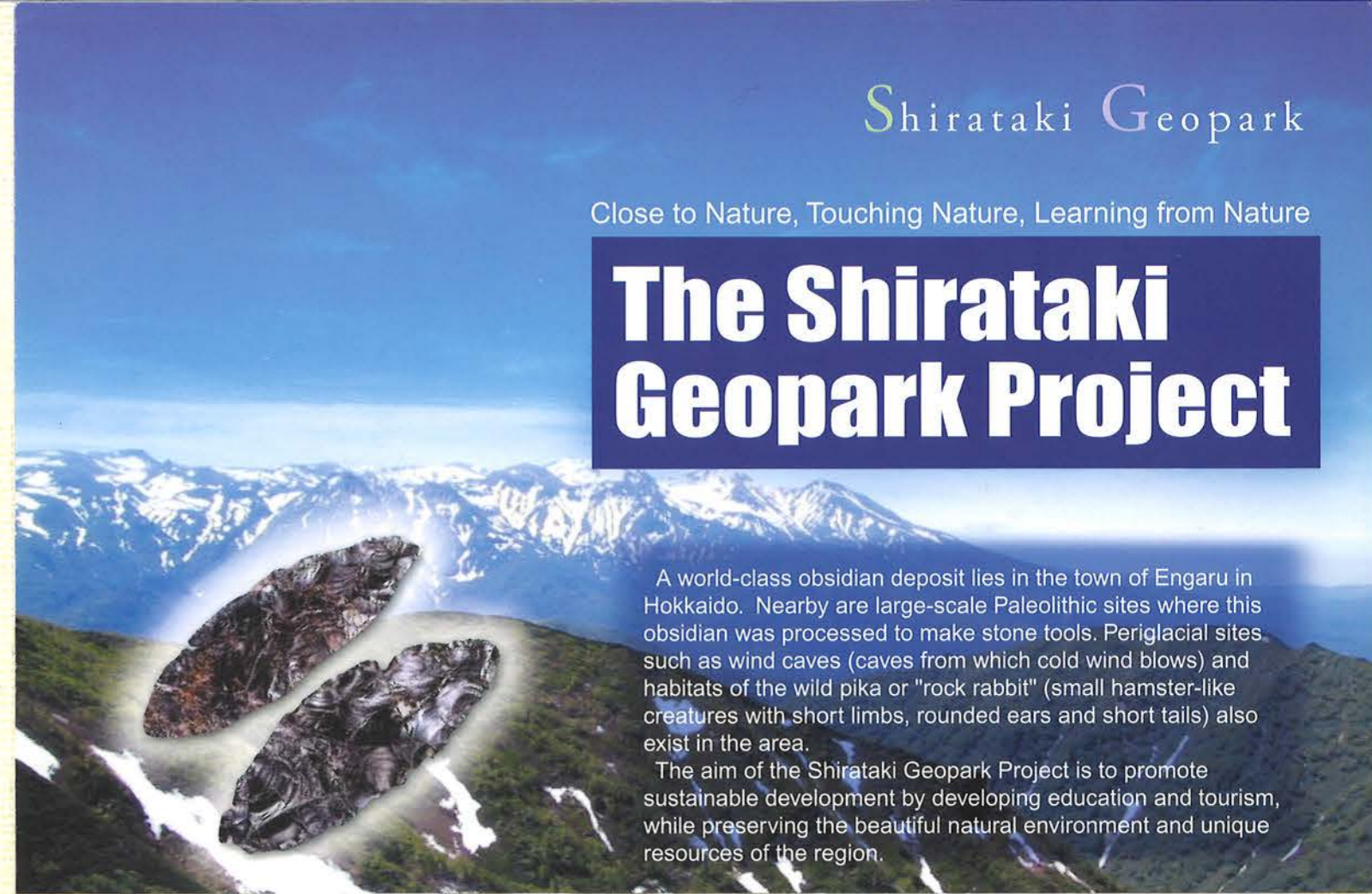


Close to Nature, Touching Nature, Learning from Nature

The Shirataki Geopark Project



A world-class obsidian deposit lies in the town of Engaru in Hokkaido. Nearby are large-scale Paleolithic sites where this obsidian was processed to make stone tools. Periglacial sites such as wind caves (caves from which cold wind blows) and habitats of the wild pika or "rock rabbit" (small hamster-like creatures with short limbs, rounded ears and short tails) also exist in the area.

The aim of the Shirataki Geopark Project is to promote sustainable development by developing education and tourism, while preserving the beautiful natural environment and unique resources of the region.

A Geopark Utilizing Local Resources

In addition to geological, archaeological and ecological assets, this region also has a range of cultural and sightseeing opportunities. We strive to raise the value of the regional assets that make up the Geopark, and to preserve and maintain this unique environment. Our vision for the Shirataki Geopark Project is to create sustainable development through such activities as: a Geopark site where people can learn about man's relationship with the earth and grow closer to nature; a facility for academic research, a center for exchange where people can have fun learning about the region; and an education and tourism program aimed at reviving visitor industries.



The Museum of Worldwide Wooden Toys: Cha Cha World

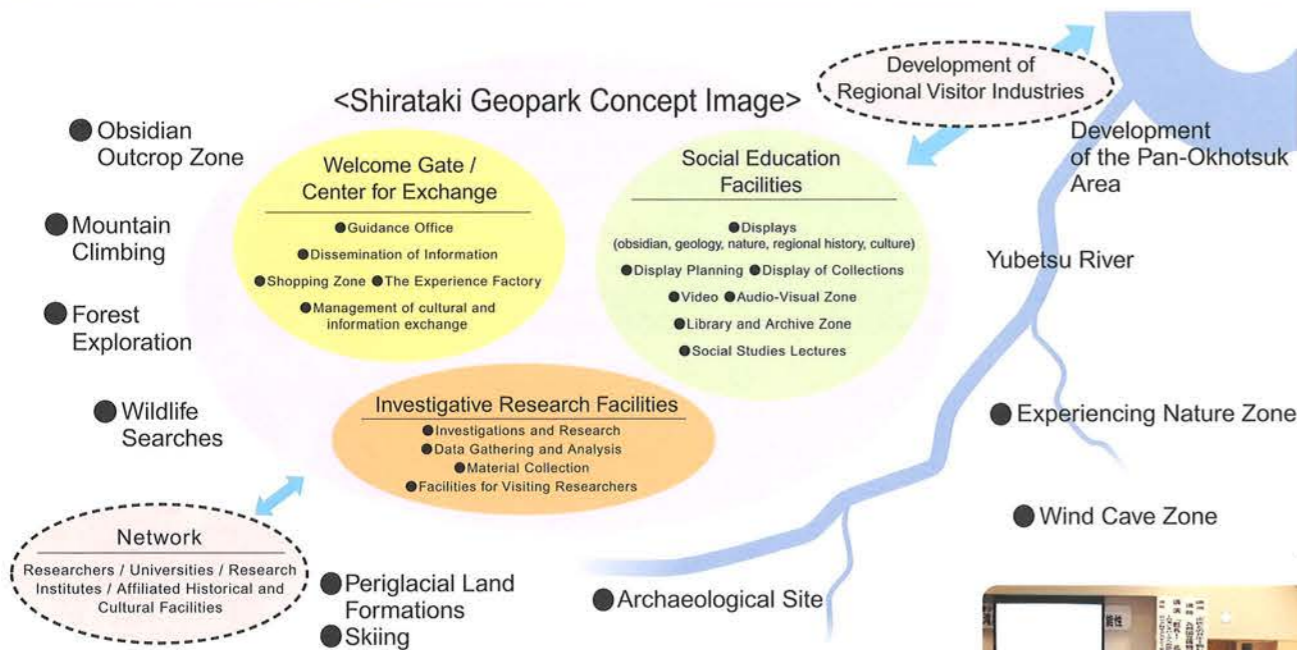


10 million cosmos flowers in bloom at the Taiyo no Oka Engaru Park



A Hokkaido Heritage: the Timber Rail Steam Engine Amamiya #21

Shirataki Geopark Concept <The Shirataki Geopark Project>



Projects Making the Geopark a Reality

The town of Engaru strives to develop a regional society and Geopark using the diverse assets of the region. Along with public awareness, academic research, education, exhibitions and environmental conservation projects, the town is collaborating with the Shirataki Geopark Project Promotion Council in its activities to further promote the Geopark vision.



An excursion around different Geopoints



Geopark Symposium



An obsidian stone tool making experience

What is a Geopark?

A Geopark is an area of important geological heritage. It contains significant geological features such as strata, rocks and landforms. Along with safeguarding geological assets and supporting research, Geoparks are educational areas that enable people to learn more about the relationship between Man and Nature. They link sustainable development with new facilities for tourism. They are also platforms for promoting education and information sharing activities regarding earth sciences and environmental issues.

-UNESCO Support for Geoparks-

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) supports the Global Geoparks Network (GGN). It has 57 members in 18 countries, mainly in Europe and China. While there are currently no Japanese Geoparks in the GGN, membership applications are under way.

A Message from Engaru to the World



Engaru Town aims to create a Geopark centered on the valuable world heritage found in the source of obsidian in Shirataki. Alongside its aims to revitalize the region by supporting educational activities and reviving tourism, Engaru Town also aims to become a member of the Global Geoparks Network.



Large Obsidian Outcrop: The Hachigousawa Outcrop

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Shirataki Geopark

Blessed with Natural Beauty and Resources

All of the important geological, archaeological, and ecological elements required for the formation of a Geopark exist in abundance in Engaru Town. The main objectives of the Shirataki Geopark Project are the continued conservation and research of these assets, while supporting sustainable regional development through education and tourism.

Geological Resources

World-Class Source of Obsidian

Obsidian is a volcanic rock with glass-like qualities. It is formed when volcanic lava (magma) cools rapidly and becomes solid without forming crystals. The Mt. Akaishi area in the Shirataki region of Engaru Town contains the largest source of obsidian in Japan. It is thought to be among the largest in the world.

A Story of Volcanic Activity Over 3 Million Years Old

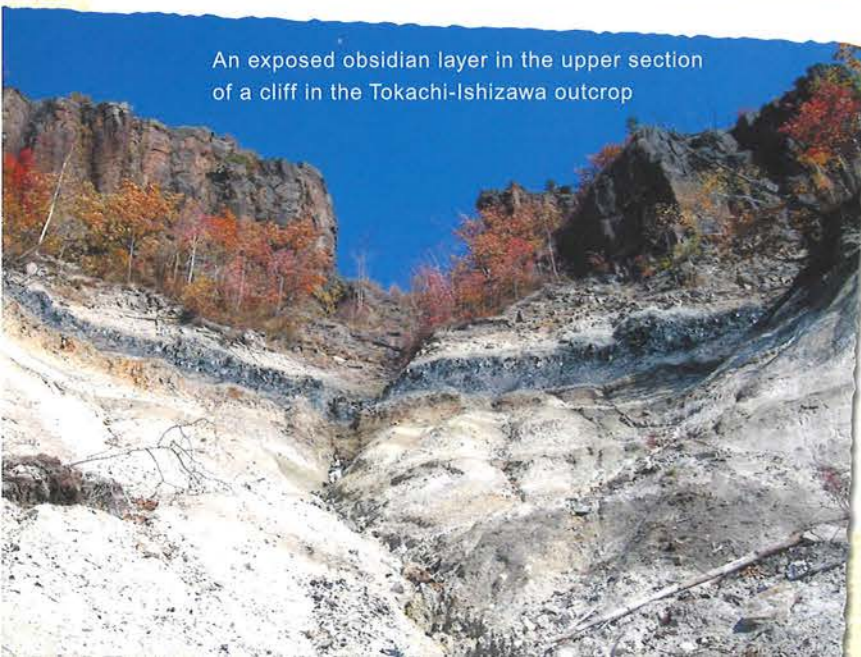
3 million years ago, an enormous volcanic eruption in the Mt. Akaishi area scattered lava which then cooled and solidified into obsidian. The scattered outcrops of obsidian in the Mt. Akaishi area provide valuable clues to past volcanic activity. Research has revealed a caldera - a cauldron-like rock formation formed by the collapse of land - that is thought to have been created by the volcanic eruption.



Obsidian formed through volcanic activity

One of Japan's Top 100 Geological Sites

Shirataki obsidian has been recognized as one of the top 100 geological assets in Japan under the Geological Information Utilization and Promotion Initiative, which selects geologically valuable areas and promotes conservation activities in those regions.



An exposed obsidian layer in the upper section of a cliff in the Tokachi-Ishizawa outcrop



Water springs from a crack in the rhyolite at the Ajisai Falls.



The Kyukanosawa outcrop visible through a break in the columns



The flow of lava is visible in the IK outcrop

Archaeological Remains

Large Scale Paleolithic Sites

A large amount of evidence from the Paleolithic period (10,000~25,000 years ago) exists in the Engaru Shirataki region. These Paleolithic sites are found alongside rivers, where sediment has been deposited by the river water to create step-shaped elevated plateaus or "river terraces" over thousands of years. Archaeological sites are scattered throughout the river basin of the Yubetsu River, with many of the Paleolithic sites among them concentrated in the Shirataki region. Due to their location next to a plentiful source of high quality obsidian, the archaeological sites in the Shirataki region are notable for the evidence they provide of large-scale stone tool production. The Shirataki sites are designated as a national historical landmark due to the number of objects found there. With hundreds of thousands of artefacts from a single excavation site, the Shirataki area is unique in possessing such a large concentration of archaeological artefacts.

An Enormous Primitive Tool Making Industry

With its extremely sharp cutting edges and glass-like qualities, obsidian was an essential tool-making material for prehistoric man. People looking for obsidian to make into tools gathered and lived here. A large number of stone tools were produced in this area using the Yubetsu Technique (named after the Yubetsu river), in which tiny stone tools called microblades are attached to the edges of spears. It is thought that the high quality obsidian raw material found in Shirataki made it the central area for stone tool production.



An excavation scene at the Shirataki site



Excavation conditions of obsidian artefacts



Stone tools made from Shirataki obsidian

Obsidian's Thousand Kilometre Journey

Tools made from Shirataki obsidian have been excavated from various sites in Hokkaido and northern Tohoku. They have even been found as far away as Sakhalin, suggesting that an extensive prehistoric distribution network existed.

Ecological Resources

An environment rich in living fossils

The periglacial regions of Shirataki and Maruseppu in Engaru Town are blessed with wide expanses of untouched natural beauty, containing naturally occurring wind caves, permafrost layers, and providing the perfect habitat for such animals as the wild pika (commonly known as "rock rabbit"). This area in the upper reaches of the Yubetsu river has some of the best areas of forest in Hokkaido, home to a diverse ecosystem and a variety of plant life.

The beautiful white flowers of the alpine bead lily in bloom



The pika or "rock rabbit", a survivor of the ice age

