

Hokkaido's Geography

Present-day Hokkaido

Hokkaido is located in the north of the Japanese archipelago which stretches east of the Asian continent. It is surrounded by the Sea of Japan, the Sea of Okhotsk and the Pacific Ocean, and faces Sakhalin Island to the north across the Soya Strait and Honshu to the south across the Tsugaru Strait, a mere 19km in width. Here in the Tsugaru Strait, the Tsugaru Warm Current, a warm current that branches off from the Tsushima Current, runs from the Sea of Japan to the Pacific Ocean at 3 knots and is locally known as the "Shoppai Kawa (Salty River)."

Apart from the main island, Hokkaido is made up of many small islands such as Rishiri Island, Rebun Island and Okushiri Island. The main island has an expansive area of 77,984.41km² and a look at the current distribution of vegetation reveals that the island is roughly split along the central mountain ranges, including the Hidaka Mountains, into deciduous broad-leaved forests in the southwest region and conifer/broadleaf mixed forests in the northeast region.



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Pre-Jomon Hokkaido

Humans first started to inhabit Hokkaido around 30,000 years ago in the Paleolithic Age. It was the last glacial stage of the late Pleistocene, and the sea level was 100m lower than it is today. Thus, the Japanese archipelago was a different shape than the one we now know. Honshu was connected by land to Shikoku and Kyushu, and this comprised the "Paleo-Honshu Island". Hokkaido was connected to Sakhalin, which was connected to the Asian continent, and therefore comprised part of the peninsula that protruded from the northeast of the continent. In the glacial period around 20,000 years ago, the average temperature dropped by 7 to 8 degrees Celsius and the sea level was 130m lower than it is today. However, as even the shallowest part of the Tsugaru Strait had a depth of 140m, Hokkaido was always separated from Paleo-Honshu Island by the sea. Consequently, even today the fauna and flora of Hokkaido more closely resemble that of the Amur River basin than that of Honshu. The Tsushima Strait was also closed up, and the Sea of Japan was more like a large lake.

As the temperature was lower than it is today, it is thought that the distribution of the vegetation differed, with evergreen forests in the southwest region and deciduous conifers in the northeast region.



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