

The Marimo Exhibition and Observation Center

The Marimo Exhibition and Observation Center is located on Churui, a tiny island near the northern end of Lake Akan, next to Churui Bay. The center features exhibits and displays about *marimo*, a unique and rare species of algae. *Marimo* are green balls of algae that form only under certain very special ecological conditions, dictated by a precise balance of sunlight, clean water, wind, and wave momentum.

This species of algae can be found in other parts of the world in different forms, but Churui Bay is now the only place where *marimo* grow and develop into large spherical balls of up to 30 centimeters in diameter. The bay's gentle waves help the *marimo* develop a perfect spherical form, while the lake bed's saline spring water and the sunlight that filters through the clear lake surface ensure the algae can thrive. Smaller *marimo* can be found in neighboring Kinetanpe Bay, also in Lake Akan. Unfortunately, the majority of *marimo* habitats around the world have been destroyed. These include Lake Akan's Shurikomabetsu Bay, where deforestation and development have devastated the *marimo* population.

At the Marimo Exhibition and Observation Center, aquariums and detailed displays teach visitors all about these unique algae. The aquariums in the center replicate the conditions at the bottom of the lake bed in Churui Bay, and show the different shapes and sizes of the algae at various stages of their life cycle, from lacy filaments to little balls to large spheres.

The Marimo Exhibition and Observation Center can be accessed by boats departing from Marimo-no-Sato Pier, which tour Lake Akan and its points of interest before dropping passengers off on Churui Island. The boat trip offers views of Mt. Oakan, Mt. Meakan, and the picturesque village of Akanko Onsen in the distance. Passengers can enjoy comfortable indoor seating or take in the views from the deck. Some boats are decorated with Ainu designs and wood crafts, and the first departure of the day includes traditional Ainu musical performances.

To promote the conservation of *marimo*, the Marimo Festival is held in October in the village of Akanko Onsen. The festival features religious blessings and dances known in the Ainu language as *torasampe* (lake spirits) and *tokarip* (lake creations), and includes ceremonies carried out in wooden canoes on the lake.