

Sado Island Gold Mines



Doyu-no-warito Opencut Site
Large-scale opencut site excavated by hand

Aiming to Inscribe Sado Island Gold Mines

Niigata Prefecture and Sado City have been collaborating in research on the Sado Island Gold Mines, aiming for its inscription as a World Cultural Heritage Site.

At present, we work on various activities, including the conservation of the property and the development of a network for receiving visitors, aiming for a smooth process for inscription on the World Heritage List.

The Value of Sado Island Gold Mines as the World Heritage Site

The property “Sado Island Gold Mines” is an exceptional industrial heritage site which bears testimony to a socio-technical system of gold production.

From the late 16th to the mid-19th century, a socio-technical system of gold production was developed on Sado Island, which is rich in gold mines. This system was a different type of system from that in Europe, as technological exchange with other countries was limited due to the Tokugawa Shogunate’s national seclusion policy. Sado’s system was developed to achieve its world-class quality and quantity of gold production based on the traditional unmechanized mining, and it was sustained on a large scale over 250 years.

Gold from Sado Island Supported the Financial Foundation of the Tokugawa Shogunate ~The Mining Town with Unprecedented Success~

In Sado, koban-coin minting was conducted using the gold produced there. This is the only mine of its kind in Japan. These koban coins were carried to Edo and continued to support the financial foundation of the Shogunate.

The Shogunate placed great importance on the gold mines of Sado Island, therefore it made investments and conducted measures to improve working environment so that gold production could be carried out efficiently over a long period of time.

In particular, Aikawa Town, which was a declining fishing village, became a center of mining operations. As gold was discovered, Aikawa Town was further developed into a large-scale mining town with systematic land allotment and town streets. Human resources needed for gold production were gathered from all over Japan. The town grew into one of the largest cities in the country, with a population of up to 50,000 people.



“Sado Koban” coin
[Dutch National Numismatic Collection, Amsterdam]



Drawing of Aikawa from the Edo Period
 (“Okamatsu Bugyo ryoko zu”
Magistrate Okamatsu’s travel, Property of Daian-ji Temple)

as a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site

Aikawa-Tsurushi Gold and Silver Mine

From the late 16th to the mid-19th century, this mine was the largest gold and silver mine in Japan.

It is a globally rare heritage site which has remains showing the development of mining technologies for hard-rock lode deposits and of settlements, together with former mining towns.

Nishimikawa Placer Gold Mine

This mine is presumed to be the oldest placer gold mine in Sado.

Many of historical remains from the Edo Period showing placer gold collection systems still can be observed here.



Placer gold
Nishimikawa Placer Gold Mine



Gold ore
Aikawa-Tsurushi Gold and Silver Mine



In Search of Gold “Visible Gold” and “Invisible Gold”

Sado had produced gold continuously as the largest gold mine in Japan.

There are two types of gold mines in Sado: “placer gold” as “visible gold” at Nishimikawa Placer Gold Mine; and “invisible gold,” contained in the hard “gold ore” at Aikawa-Tsurushi Gold and Silver Mine. In order to obtain these effectively, the then-existing technology and Sado’s social system were arranged into a socio-technical system.

Historical materials remaining in abundance ~Sado Mines picture scrolls / technical books~

In Sado, under the control of the Tokugawa Shogunate, huge numbers of materials were made for report to the Shogunate. Approximately 150 of the picture scrolls of Sado Gold and Silver Mines, which can still be seen in Japan and abroad, technical books for mining, and other historical materials about Sado convey detailed mining operations and mining techniques at the time of operation. They are also crucial for the interpretation and understanding of the remains on site.



Picture Scrolls of Sado Gold and Silver Mines(18-19th Century)



A picture of how to classify ore grade
 (“Kinginzan Taigaisho”: Technical book of Sado, 18th Century)

Nishimikawa Placer Gold Mine

The history of gold and silver production in Sado goes back to the Heian Period (794-1185). In the *Konjaku-monogatari-shu* (Tales of Times Now and Past), a collection of tales written around the 12th century, it was said that gold panning was conducted at the Nishimikawa Placer Gold Mine.

At the Nishimikawa Placer Gold Mine, after the mountainside was scraped and the dirt containing gold in layers was dropped down into the headraces, workers would flush out the reservoir all at once in a method called "Onagashi" (great flow) to wash away any excess dirt. In order to secure the amount of water necessary, the miners installed long headraces that ran from the water sources to the reservoirs, which stored large volumes of water. Extensive remains of these mines and waterways survive.



Placer gold mining sites and mining settlement



Oyamazumi-jinja Shrine, which enshrines a deity of mines
photo by Nishiyama Hoichi



"Sado kanayama" (Gold Mine in Sado: Famous Views of the 68 Provinces Series), Ukiyo-e print depicting the scene of gold panning, Utagawa Hiroshige the second, the late 19th Century, Property of Nagaoka City Central Library



Toramaru-yama Site: Mining site scraped by "Onagashi", photo by Nishiyama Hoichi



Tsurushi Silver Mine Local Magistrate's Office Site,
on man-made terrace



Otaki-mabu Tunnel, one of the representative mining tunnels of
Tsurushi Silver Mine, photo by Nishiyama Hoichi



Hyakumaidaira Mining Zone, large surface mining site



Aikawa-Tsurushi Gold and Silver Mine **[Tsurushi Silver Mine]**

This mine was first discovered in the middle of the 16th century and was the largest silver mine in Sado, where more than 600 remains of mining locations have been identified. Various mining techniques at different times have been identified at the Tsurushi Silver Mine: “surface mining,” mining ores on the surface of the ground; “chase mining,” digging along the shape of veins; and “tunnel mining,” mining ores by digging horizontal tunnels that would cross several lodes. In addition, many remains related to around the mines have been identified, such as the local magistrate’s office and mining settlements.



Byobusawa Mining Zone, chase mining site



Aikawa-Tsurushi Gold and Silver Mine [Aikawa Gold and Silver Mine]

Full-scale development of the Aikawa area began in 1601, when Sado was directly controlled by the Tokugawa Shogunate. Mine proprietors called “Yamashi” were called to Sado from Iwami and other areas in Japan, and then-existing techniques in surveying, drainage, and smelting (cupellation, sulfur cementation and salt cementation) were introduced.

These techniques led Aikawa Gold and Silver Mine to become one of the largest mines in the world. Such techniques used in Sado later spread all over the country. There were no other mines in Japan that conducted operations entirely from mining to minting koban coins, of which processes can be seen in the remaining sites and vividly depicted in picture scrolls.



Sado Magistrate's Office Site



Doyu-no-warito Opencut Site, seen from the sky:
The V-shaped chasm in the center of the mountain
(120m long, 10~30m wide, 74m deep)



@giri-yama-mabu Tunnel: Another tunnel for ventilation
lies parallel to the main mining tunnel



Aikawa-Kamimachi Town: The townscape of the
mining town exists



Unearthed artifacts
at Sado Magistrate's Office Site
photo by Ogawa Tadahiro



"Sado-no-kuni Kanahori-no-maki" (Picture Scroll: Gold Minting in Sado),
production processes of koban coins, property of Aikawa Folk Museum



Minamizawa Drainage Tunnel,
opened in late 17th Century



Festival of the mining town (Uto-jinja Shrine)



"Yawaragi" (Shinto ritual in the gold mine)



A Shared Treasure for Humanity

A World Heritage Site is a place that is a shared treasure for humanity, brought about by nature and mankind, and that has been passed down from the past to the present. These sites include places that are endangered by war, natural disasters, and environmental pollutions. Under the protection of international cooperation (across borders), people all over the world should preserve World Heritage Sites for future generations.

UNESCO and the World Heritage Site

UNESCO is a specialized agency of the United Nations, and the World Heritage Centre is located within its headquarters. Based on the World Heritage Convention, they created the framework of international cooperation to preserve and pass down World Heritage Sites, and calls for the protection of World Heritage Sites.



Kirarium Sado, Sado Island Gold Mines Visitor Center

“All Sado Island Gold Mines Start Here”

As the entrance of Sado Island Gold Mines, the information distribution center “Kirarium Sado” was opened in April 2019.

We will show you the world of Sado Island Gold Mines through exhibitions to demonstrate its history lasting from the Edo Period, and there are four theatres to plainly explain how gold and silver were produced.

1 8-1 Aikawa Sancho-me-Hamamachi, Sado City, Niigata, 952-1562

Access: Approx. 50 min. by car from Ryotsu Port / approx. 75 min. by car from Ogi Port

Tel: + 81 (0)259-74-2215 **Fax:** + 81 (0)259-74-2223

Business Hours: 8:30 AM – 5 PM (Reception closes at 4:30 PM)

Closed: December 29 through January 3

Entry Fee: 300 yen for ages 15+ / 150 yen for ages 7-15

Groups (15 people or more): 250 yen per person for ages 15+

100 yen per person for ages 7-15



Toward World Heritage Inscription
Your support would be highly appreciated

**World Heritage Inscription Promotion Office,
Culture Division, Department of Tourism,
Culture and Sports**

4-1 Shinko-cho, Chuo-ku, Niigata City, 950-8570

Tel: + 81 (0)25-280-5726

Fax: + 81 (0)25-280-5764

E-mail: negt150030@pref.niigata.lg.jp

World Heritage Promotion Division, Sado City

232 Chigusa, Sado City, Niigata, 952-1292

Tel: + 81 (0)259-63-5136

Fax: + 81 (0)259-63-6130

E-mail: k-goldmine@city.sado.niigata.jp

For more information,
please see the website

Sado Island Gold Mines

Accessible also from the 2D code

