

Conservation efforts in the Shiretoko-goko lakes area

● Current status of use of the Shiretoko-goko lakes area

The Shiretoko-goko lakes area is a central region visited annually by about 500,000 tourists who want to explore pristine nature. However, because large numbers of tourists are concentrated on the ground pathways and viewing points, the nearby vegetation is being trampled and is deteriorating. Furthermore, because large clusters of tourists use the area on specific days of the week or at specific hours of the day, it has become difficult to maintain the high quality of nature-based experiences at this World Natural Heritage site.

In addition, because the Shiretoko-goko lakes area is a habitat for brown bears, prevention of conflict and incidents between brown bears and visitors has become an important issue. From spring to early summer, food resources for brown bears become abundant around the Shiretoko-goko lakes, and brown bears make frequent appearances. Therefore, at this time we are forced to close the ground pathways to secure visitor safety, making it difficult to ensure the stability of use opportunities for this area. On the other hand, although we have been trying to raise public awareness of appropriate visitor behaviour, these efforts are not legally binding. Visitor behaviours that could attract brown bears—such as eating while walking—are still seen, and the problems remain unsolved.

● System of use to solve current problems in the Shiretoko-goko lakes area

To solve these problems, discussions were held among administrative organisations and concerned local bodies in accordance with the provisions of the Management Plan for the Shiretoko World Natural Heritage Nominated Site (January 2004) [(5. Management Strategy: (2) Conservation of the terrestrial ecosystem and natural landscape; and (4) Proper usage of the natural environment. Subsequently, a revised Management Plan was drawn up and it retained these provisions.)]. As a result, we have decided to implement the following two plans integrally: (a) construction of an elevated boardwalk to ensure the safety of, and stable use of the area by, general visitors; and (b) introduction of a Regulated Utilisation Area in accordance with the Natural Parks Law to secure ground pathways and thus give specific users opportunities for high-quality nature-based experiences. These measures will help in the

development of careful and proper ecotourism and eventually of a diverse and strong local economy as mentioned in the recommendations of the Report of the reactive monitoring mission (2008) by IUCN and the World Heritage Centre.

▪ **Safe and freely usable elevated boardwalk**

The full 800-m elevated boardwalk was opened in April 2010. The boardwalk is about 2 to 5 m above ground, and the bridge piers are equipped with electric fences to enable the separation of traffic lines of humans and wild animals, including brown bears, and the safe use of the area despite the frequent appearances of brown bears. The boardwalk is about 2 m wide and the slope is gentle enough to allow the use of wheelchairs. A dwarf bamboo field on former pasture land was chosen as the site of the elevated boardwalk to minimize the impact on the natural environment, and the design and construction methods were chosen in consultation with experts to minimize the impact on wild animals, including rare birds of prey. Thus, the construction of the elevated boardwalk does not diminish the values of the Shiretoko World Natural Heritage site.



Figure 1. The elevated boardwalk



Figure 2. An electric bear fence

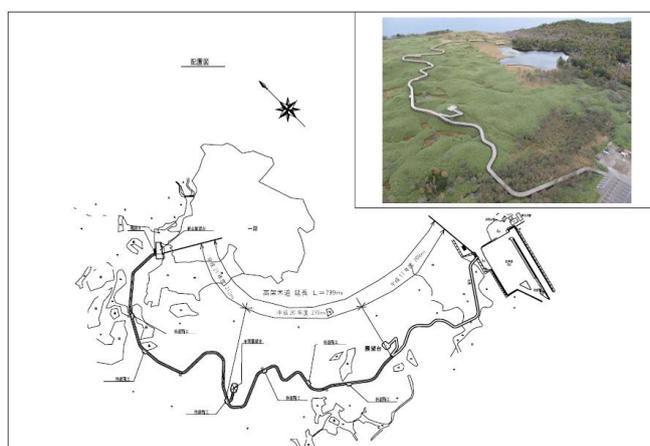


Figure 3. The route of the boardwalk

- **Use restriction of ground pathways**

In the Regulated Utilisation Area, entry into areas except by the ground pathways, as well as the feeding of wild animals, eating, etc., is prohibited to prevent damage to vegetation by visitors and also to prevent conflict and incidents between visitors and brown bears. Furthermore, use will be restricted during certain periods. During these periods, visitors must undergo certain entry procedures and must also listen to instructions on how to avoid encounters with brown bears and on important points such as how to avoid damaging the vegetation.

The periods when use is restricted are decided according to brown bear activity and visitor trends. They are the “Bear Aware Season,” from mid May to late July, and the “Ecosystem Aware Season,” from early August to late October. Outside these periods, visitors can use the area freely.

During the “Bear Aware Season,” visitors may use the area only when accompanied by a Shiretoko-goko lakes registered guide, who knows the techniques for avoiding brown bear encounters, etc. The number of visitors is controlled by restricting the number that can accompany one guide at any one time, and also by restricting the interval between entries to the ground pathways and the number of groups on the ground pathways at one time.

During the “Ecosystem Aware Season” visitors are not required to be accompanied by the guide. However, to avoid concentration of use the number of visitors is controlled by restricting the number of new entries per hour, the interval between entries to the ground pathways, and the number of visitors per day.