

Geography of Japan



Geography of Japan

Location

Japan consists of several thousands of islands, of which Honshu, Hokkaido, Kyushu and Shikoku are the four largest. Japan's closest neighbors are Korea, Russia and China. The Sea of Japan separates the Asian continent from the Japanese archipelago.

Area

Japan's area is comparable to that of Germany or California. Japan's northernmost islands are located on a similar geographical latitude as Milan or Portland, while her southernmost islands are on a similar latitude as the Bahamas. More than 50% of the country is mountainous and covered by forests. Japan is politically structured into 8 regions and 47 prefectures.

Earthquakes and Volcanoes

Because Japan is located in a region, where several continental plates meet, the country experiences frequent earthquakes. For the same reason, there are many volcanoes and natural hot springs in Japan. Japan's most famous volcano and highest mountain is Mt.Fuji.

Climate

Due to the large North-South extension of the country, the climate varies strongly in different regions. The climate in most of the major cities, including Tokyo, is temperate to subtropics and consists of four seasons. The winter is mild and the summer is hot and humid. There is a rainy season in early summer, and typhoons hit parts of the country every year during late summer. The climate of the northern island of Hokkaido and the Sea of Japan coast is colder, and snow falls in large amounts. In Okinawa, on the other hand, the mean temperature of January is a warm 17 degrees Celsius.

Physical Systems

Japan is located in the Pacific Ring of Fire, and has 186 volcanoes, of which about sixty are active. Many towns are famous for hot springs, or onsen. Japan is seismically active; many of its great cities are built on fault lines. Tokyo and Yokohama were largely destroyed by fires resulting from the great Earthquake of 1923 which took 130,000 lives. The city of Kobe experienced a devastating earthquake in 1995.

Since Japan is in the Northern Hemisphere, seasons are similar to North America and Europe. Winter can produce heavy snowfall on the western sides of Hokkaido and Honshu, as the Siberian winds pick up moisture from the Sea of Japan and deposit it as snow in the Japan Alps. Winter months are dry on the Eastern side of Japan.

Kyushu, being nearer the equator, is the first to experience spring's national treasure, the sakura, or cherry blossoms. Hanami, cherry blossom viewing, occurs in late March (Hokkaido in May), and can be compared to the delight some Americans take in viewing fall foliage. Continuous warm rains follow. The mountains define the boundaries of moisture received; the Pacific side receives less, and the Sea of Japan coast gets tropical rains. All Japan experiences a humid summer. The Japan Current (Kuroshio) provides a balmy autumn. Around

November, typhoons (hurricanes) bearing fierce winds over water, aim for the southeastern part of the country. Usually, Japan's typhoons have exhausted themselves by the time they reach the Kanto Plain.

Environment and Society

No one lives further than seventy miles from the coast, so Japanese are oriented to the sea, even though their land is mountainous. Nearly all the people live on several flat coastal plains where it has been possible to farm. Only one, the Kanto Plain, is very extensive, about 120 miles long. This is Tokyo-Yokohama-Kawasaki, dominant urban and industrial region of the country. It has level land, a mild, moist climate suitable for farming, a deep harbor at Yokohama, and is more or less central to the country. It holds nearly one-third of the population (largest urban agglomeration in the world), and produces 20% of Japan's manufacturing. "Tokyo area is among the chief producers of steel, using iron ores from the Philippines, Malaysia, Australia, India and even Africa; most of the coal is imported from Australia and North America; the petroleum from Southwest Asia and Indonesia. The Kanto Plain cannot produce nearly enough food for its massive resident population. Food must be imported from Canada, the United States, and Australia as well as from other areas in Japan. Thus Tokyo depends on external trade for all things ranging from food to energy." (deBlij, 312-313)

Coastal plains include the Kansai District (Kobe-Kyoto-Osaka triangle), the Kansai or Tokaido megalopolis, the Nobi plain, (Nagoya,) and the Toyama district. Farmland can be found among the housing, public facilities, and general industrial sprawl of these areas. Farmers are adept at intense cultivation of fruit and vegetables, and small rice paddies are the norm. There is less population density in Hokkaido, where cattle and dairy industries are growing, with meat becoming a much more important part of the Japanese diet, especially among young people.

Japan is the leading fishing nation in the world, plying the high seas to feed the largest per capita fish-consuming nation. Increasingly, aqua-culture technology cultivates shellfish, seafood, and seaweed in many shallow bays and estuaries. (Reischauer, 24)

The Seto Inland Sea was the axis for much of Japan's early history. Seas were once the major means of communication/transportation, but modern Japan has superb internal systems, including railway lines, subway systems, enormous bridges and tunnels to connect this island nation. The tunnel to Hokkaido is longer than the European "Chunnel". Airline travel is available, and the shinkansen trains carry passengers at speeds averaging over one hundred miles per hour.

Places and Regions

The Jakota Triangle- (Japan, Korea, Taiwan) is characterized by huge cities, enormous global commerce, high consumption of raw materials, and rapid development. Japan is also part of the Pacific Rim, with land facing the Pacific, relatively high levels of industrialization and urbanization indicating high levels of economic development, and huge imports/ exports which move mainly across the Pacific.

Japan can be seen as small units of mountainous terrain; some scholars suggest that this is one reason for the decentralized pattern of government developed in feudal times. Today, there are forty-seven prefectures, many still following historic mountain boundaries. Japan's regions are: Hokkaido, Tohoku, Chubu, Kanto, Chugoku, Kinki, Shikoku, and Kyushu-Okinawa. Japan's rivers are small, not navigable for any great length, fast moving and useful for generating some

hydroelectric power. Rivers and plentiful rainfall make possible extensive agriculture and forest production. Wood is also imported, largely from Southeast Asia.

Uses of Geography

The subject of geographic study is space; for much of Japan, space is a rare commodity. As early as the 1600s, the people of Tokyo, then Edo, filled in wetlands around the Imperial Palace. Modern Tokyo has attracted a huge population, demanding space; land reclamation has resulted in the filling of 20% of the surface area of Tokyo Bay. Tokyo International Airport, Disneyland, and Yokohama seaport facilities are on reclaimed land. A Landsat Image in National Geographic, October, 2002, shows the incredible extent of this human alteration of natural environment. The impact on the fishing industry is monumental; the impact on humans living there is being discovered daily. (Dalby, 42)

Sources:

<https://www.japan-guide.com>

<https://spice.fsi.stanford.edu>