

# Hidden Wonders | A Village with Japan's Lowest Population Density

人口が少ない地域と聞くと、不便さや将来への不安を思い浮かべる人もいるかもしれません。けれども、福島県の檜枝岐村のように「日本で最も人口密度が低い」とされる場所には、その数字だけでは語れない暮らしのかたちがあります。人が少ないという事実は、本当に弱さなののでしょうか。それとも、別の価値を生み出す可能性を秘めているのでしょうか。あなたなら、どんな点に意味を見いだしますか。



## 1. Article

Read the following article aloud.

Located at the southwestern tip of Fukushima Prefecture and bordering Niigata, Gunma, and Tochigi, Hinoemata Village is known as Japan's least densely populated village. It also serves as Fukushima's gateway to the pristine Ozegahara marshlands. With a population of fewer than 500 and around 40% of residents aged 65 or older, the village faces the challenges of a shrinking and aging community.

Hinoemata Village covers about 390 sq km (150 sq mi) and had a population of 479 as of the end of March 2025. This translates to a population density of just 1.23 people per sq km (3.2 per sq mi), with an aging rate of 39.87%.

By comparison, Tokyo's 23 wards span about 628 sq km (243 sq mi), roughly 1.6 times the size of Hinoemata. Yet they are home to around 9.87 million people as of March 1, 2025, with a population density exceeding 15,700 per sq km (40,700 per sq mi).

Continued on next page.

Source: Hidden Wonders | A Village with Japan's Lowest Population Density

Japan Forward

本教材は、一般社団法人ジャパンフワード推進機構、株式会社産経デジタルより許諾を得て、産経ヒューマンラーニング株式会社が編集しています。  
テキストの無断転載・無断使用を固く禁じます。

# 1. Article

The main settlement, where the village office is located, sits at an elevation of around 1,000 m (3,280 ft), and winter snowfall can reach as much as 3 m (10 ft).

While the village has a few agricultural cooperative shops, the nearest convenience stores and large supermarkets are in neighboring Minamiaizu Town, about one hour away by car. The village's only clinic provides internal medicine and pediatric services, so residents must travel to Minamiaizu Town for hospital-level care.

Hinoemata has one combined elementary and junior high school, with 46 students from first grade through the third year of junior high in the 2025 school year. Most high school students attend schools in Minamiaizu Town or Aizuwakamatsu City, more than two hours away by car. To support students who must live away from home, the village operates a dormitory in Aizu-Wakamatsu called Oze Dormitory.

Surnames in the village are also distinctive. Three names, Hoshi, Hirano, and Tachibana, account for about 70% of the population. Of these, roughly 60% are Hoshi, 30% Hirano, and 10% Tachibana. Mayor Nobuyuki Hirano says, "People usually call each other by their first names, and if two residents share the same full name, we add the name of their district to tell them apart."

To outsiders, life in the village may seem full of inconveniences, but many residents see it differently. Mitsuru Hoshi of the village office's General Affairs Division recalls with a smile, "It was fun living at Oze Dormitory when I left home for high school, because I was always with my friends and away from my parents." He adds that spending those years outside the village with friends only strengthened their bonds.

When Typhoon Hagibis struck eastern Japan in October 2019, river embankments collapsed, causing a village-wide power outage and damaging roads. More than 50 people, including Mitsuru's family, took shelter in public halls. Mitsuru himself was unable to leave work. "I was worried about my family, but people helped set up partition tents at the shelter," he recalls. "In an emergency, it is reassuring when everyone knows each other."

Toshihide Hoshi, head of the village Chamber of Commerce and owner of a local inn, says, "The village itself is like one big company. When I came back after working elsewhere, I truly felt how strong our social ties are." He adds with a smile, "Out of the 15 or 16 classmates I had, 10 are still here, and we have a great time."

About 98% of the village is forest, and the inhabited area covers only around 2 sq km (0.8 sq mi). Daily life is compact and easy to manage on foot, and there is no school bus service. Mayor Hirano says the village is like a "compact city," emphasizing its convenience.

# 1. Article

Still, population **decline** and rapid aging remain serious challenges. Mayor Hirano admits, "Honestly, it is difficult to increase the population," but notes that Japan has entered an era in which many older people continue to work. "We want to create a system where they can contribute as part of the workforce." He believes that being needed can give people a sense of purpose.

The village's close-knit culture can be an advantage. Everyone interviewed in Hinoemata said that kodokushi, the phenomenon of dying alone and remaining undiscovered for a long time, does not occur there.



Source: Hidden Wonders | A Village with Japan's Lowest Population Density



## 2. Key phrases and vocabulary

First repeat after your tutor and then read aloud by yourself.

1. **resident** 住民

Every resident in the building received a letter about the safety inspection last week.

2. **density** 密度

The density of traffic increases sharply during the morning commute in the capital.

3. **distinctive** 独特な

Billie Eilish has a distinctive voice that makes her easy to recognize.

4. **account for** 占める

Online sales account for more than half of the company's total income this year.

5. **decline** 減少

There has been a decline in the number of customers visiting the electronics shop.

## 3. Questions

Read the questions aloud and answer them.

1. What services are located in Hinoemata Village, and what services are not?
2. What do residents of Hinoemata appreciate about the town? Include examples.
3. What does Mayor Hirano mean when he says Hinoemata is like a compact city?
4. Why do you think strong social ties are important in small communities?
5. How can communities support older adults in aging societies?

## 4. 住民の主な姓は3つ、コンビニは村外 「日本一人口密度が低い村」 福島・檜枝岐

福島県の南西端に位置し新潟、群馬、栃木3県と県境を接する檜枝岐（ひのえまた）村は「日本一人口密度が低い村」として知られる。自然の宝庫・尾瀬の福島県側玄関口でもある“秘境の村”は、人口が500人を割り込み、65歳以上の住民が占める割合で示す高齢化率は、ほぼ40%に達している。山あいの村で“暮らしのリアル”に迫った。

村の面積は約390平方キロで、3月末現在の人口は479人。1平方キロにどれだけの人が住んでいるかを表す人口密度は約1・23人に過ぎず、高齢化率は39・87%だ。ちなみに東京23区の面積は檜枝岐村の約1・6倍約628平方キロで、約987万人（2025年3月1日現在）が暮らし、人口密度は1万5700人を超える。

村役場などがある集落部は標高1000メートル前後で、冬場は降雪量が3メートルになることもある。村に農協の販売店などはあるが、最寄りのコンビニや大手スーパーがあるのは隣の南会津町。車で約1時間かかる。村内唯一の診療所は内科と小児科だけ。総合病院で診てもらうには、やはり南会津町まで行く必要がある。

学校は小中一貫の1校で今年度は小学1年～中学3年まで46人が在籍。高校は南会津町や車で2時間以上かかる会津若松市方面に進学するケースがほとんどだ。会津若松市には村営の寄宿舍「尾瀬寮」があり、親元を離れた子供たちを支えている。

村民の名字には特徴がある。星、平野、橘の3姓が約7割を占め、3姓全体の中での内訳は星が約6割、平野が約3割、橘が約1割という。記者が名刺交換した10人の村民は星さん6人、平野さん2人、橘さん1人、その他が1人だった。平野信之村長は「みんな下の名前で呼び合い、同姓同名の人は住む地区を入れて呼ぶ」と話す。

村の生活を聞いて記者は不便さも感じたが、村民の受け止め方は異なる。村役場総務課の星満さん（39）は「高校進学で実家を出て住んだ尾瀬寮は楽しかった。友達がみんな一緒に親のいない生活ですから」と笑い、「村外で地元の仲間と暮らして絆が強まった」と感じている。

## 4. 住民の主な姓は3つ、コンビニは村外 「日本一人口密度が低い村」 福島・檜枝岐

令和元年10月の東日本台風では河川の護岸が決壊、全村で停電し道路にも被害が出た。公民館などに50人以上が避難し、そこに満さんの家族もいた。しかし、満さんは職場を離れられない。「家族が気がかりだったが、避難所で間仕切り用のテント設置を手伝ってもらうなど助けてもらえた。非常時にみんな顔見知りだと心強い」と振り返る。

村の商工会長で旅館を営む星俊秀さん（68）は「村自体が一つの会社のよう。就職で村を一度離れて帰ってきたときに、人付き合いの濃さを感じた」といい、「15～16人いた同級生の10人が今も一緒に楽しい」と満足そうだ。

村は約98%が林野で人が暮らす集落部は2平方キロほど。生活範囲は狭く徒歩で事足り、スクールバスもない。平野村長は「実はコンパクトシティーです」と利便性を強調する。

ただ、人口減や少子高齢化は深刻。平野村長は「正直、人を増やすのは難しい」とした上で「お年寄りも働く時代。労働力として地域に関わってもらえる流れを作りたい」と話す。必要とされれば生きる励みになると考えているからだ。その実現には「みんな知り合い」という村の特徴は強みになるに違いない。村で話を聞いた人は異口同音にこう語っていた。「孤独死はないと思う」