

FEATURES



The view of Oshima Strait from Amami Oshima overlooking Kakeroma Island. This strait serves as the stage for the sea kayak race.

Sea Kayak Race Speeding Through Southern Island Seas

Every summer, a sea kayak competition is held with Amami Oshima Island in Kagoshima Prefecture as its starting and ending point. It is said to be the largest event of its kind in Japan, attracting numerous participants from across the country. We spoke with the organizers of this event.

(Text: TANAKA Nozomi)

Kagoshima Prefecture, located in the southernmost part of Japan's Kyushu region, is a prefecture with 28¹ inhabited islands of various sizes, making it one of Japan's foremost remote island prefectures. The largest of these islands is Amami Oshima. Located approximately 380 kilometers south of Kagoshima City in the open sea, it is the fifth largest island among Japan's remote islands². Positioned approximately midway between



Participants of the sea kayak race starting from Koniya Port in Amami Oshima, swiftly paddling away.



Photo: Setouchi Town

Left: Immediately after the start, boats are packed together, crossing the strait.

Right: Race participants navigating the designated landing points of the sea kayak race receive warm cheers from the residents.

Kagoshima Prefecture and Okinawa Prefecture, this island features a warm and humid subtropical maritime climate year-round. As a result, it is endowed with rich natural landscapes and scenic spots, including pristine mangrove forests³.

Every July, the Amami Sea Kayak Marathon Race in Kakeroma is held between Amami Oshima Island and its neighboring island, Kakeroma. The race is conducted using sea kayaks⁴, a type of canoe designed for enjoying the sea. Kakeroma Island is a nearby island, approximately a 15-minute ferry ride from Koniya Port, located at the southern tip of Amami Oshima Island. The race is said to be the largest of its kind in Japan. We spoke with the Setouchi Town Fisheries Tourism Division, the organizers, to learn about the event.

“The course is set in the Oshima Strait between the southernmost coast of Amami Oshima Island and Kakeroma Island, where participants navigate in sea kayaks to compete based on their times. Starting from Koniya Port on Amami Oshima Island, the course includes landing at two beaches on Kakeroma Island and passing through Tawaroko Island, covering approximately 33 kilometers round-trip back to Koniya Port. The race follows a rule where participants visit three designated landing checkpoints along the course. At each checkpoint, locals offer refreshments, fostering enjoyable interactions between participants and local residents. In addition, there is a half-course option of approximately 20 kilometers that bypasses the Tawaroko Island checkpoint. In 2023, 360 participants from across the country took part. This year, the event is scheduled to take place over two days, July 6 and 7, 2024.”

In recent years, it has been reported that between 200 to 250 kayaks, involving 350 to 400 people, regularly take part in the race. Many participants are known to participate without fail each year. Riding on sea kayaks allows participants to appreciate up

close the beautiful sea of Amami with its expansive coral reefs and the majestic nature of Kakeroma Island. This closeness to nature is a significant attraction. Repeat participants from afar often express that the event offers a sense of accomplishment akin to a marathon at sea. They also savor the taste of *onigiri* (rice balls) prepared by local residents, making the race about more than just competing for time; it's also about enjoying interactions with islanders when landing.

There are currently no participants from overseas in the race, but they say entry would be possible with proper preparation. Of course, visiting the island just to watch the race, cheering alongside the islanders at landing points, and enjoying the blue sea and beautiful beaches, would also be enjoyable. Try and visit Amami Oshima Island at least once during the summer when the sea kayak competition is held and experience the allure of the southern Japanese island seas. **7**



One of the landing points, Surihama Beach in Kakeroma Island, boasts a beautiful beach with white sand.



At the post-race festival, in addition to the awards ceremony, there are performances by musicians, providing everyone with a chance to unwind and celebrate.

Photo: PIXTA

Photo: Setouchi Town

1. Source: <https://www.pref.kagoshima.jp/ac07/pr/shima/gaiyo/pamph2022.html> (Japanese only).
2. Based on measurements from Japan's electronic national basic land maps issued by the Geospatial Information Authority as of April 1, 2023.
3. A collective term for plant communities and forests that grow in areas where freshwater and seawater mix in tropical and subtropical regions.
4. A type of canoe used for enjoying the sea. Unlike traditional canoes, it has a deck covering most of the boat except for the seating area, making it less likely for water to enter the boat even when waves come, thus providing excellent stability and straight-line performance.