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TEACHING TUESDAY

ZAO SNOW MONSTERS

JANUARY 17, 2017

Many people flock to the Zao Mountain Range on the border of Miyagi and Yamagata Prefectures in the winter, but not only for the skiing and onsen. From late December through March, the Yamagata side of the range is covered with “juhyo” (樹氷), or snow monsters.

These snow monsters are rare sight even in Japan, and only appear when several weather and vegetation conditions come together at just the right time. Of course, they’re not actually monsters, but rather fir trees covered in snow and frozen rain. Under certain weather conditions, freezing water droplets are mixed with snow and blasted against the trees by high wind, gradually accumulating and taking on the monster-like shapes.

Visitors can walk amongst the juhyo, or even take a ropeway to the top of the mountain to look at the sight from above. At nights during January and February, the juhyo trees are lit up with colorful lights, making them look even more surreal that they do in the day.