

The Current State of Ecotourism in Japan

Riho IMAGAWA and Brian HARRISON

Abstract

Ecotourism is a form of tourism that has developed since the late 20th century. Within Japan, growth and awareness of ecotourism has been extremely low. This paper examines the situation in Japan by considering the positive effects of ecotourism, identifying those areas of the country which are known for the operation of ecotours, and discussing why there is such low recognition of the term ecotourism. After surveying the efforts that have been made by various actors to promote ecotourism, there are proposals for measures that are needed in the future.

Key Words

ecotourism, environmental conservation, new tourism,
sustainable tourism, Japanese studies

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Definition and principles of ecotourism

During the latter part of the 20th century, more and more people began to be concerned about environmental issues, and at the same time there was a considerable growth in tourism. This led to the development of the concept of “sustainable development”, with the World Commission on Environment and Development defining this in 1987 as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (United Nations 2010). In the field of tourism, ecotourism became known as one type of sustainable tourism.

There is no single definition of ecotourism, with various national ecotourism societies having slight variations in how they define the term. Perhaps the simplest and most authoritative definition is that provided by The International Ecotourism Society (TIES), which states that ecotourism is “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people” (TIES 1990). Explaining the concept further, TIES believes that the principles of ecotourism are to minimize impacts on the environment; build environmental and cultural awareness and respect; provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts; provide direct financial benefits and empowerment for local people; and to raise sensitivity to the host countries’ political, environmental, and social climate.

In an updated version of the definition released in 2015, TIES defines ecotourism as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education” (TIES 2015). Here, the term education is meant to be inclusive of both staff and guests. The TIES declaration continues by emphasizing that ecotourism is concerned with uniting conservation, communities, and sustainable travel. TIES explains that the previous mention of minimizing impacts should include physical, social, behavioural and psychological impacts. Another of the original principles defined in 1990 is explained in greater detail, saying that there should be direct financial benefits for conservation, and that there should be financial benefits for both local people and private industry. Additional principles that were added to the original definition were that activities should include the design, construction and operation of low-impact facilities; should recognize the rights and spiritual beliefs of the indigenous people in the community; and should encourage working in partnership with them to create empowerment. It is perhaps this last point that is the most significant change in the definition (TIES 2015).

Since this paper will consider ecotourism in Japan, it is perhaps useful to examine the definition of ecotourism as given by the Japan Ecotourism Society (JES), which states that “ecotourism aims to activate local economies by providing tourists with opportunities to experience local attractions accompanied by competent interpreters while preserving local resources such as the natural environment, the culture and historical heritages” (JES, date unknown). The society emphasizes that the key points are environmental conservation, originality of the locals, and excitement. They further explain that it is necessary to have the participation of five separate groups in order to achieve success, namely local communities, government, researchers, the tourism industry, and tourists who want to experience the real Japan.

It is not surprising that the two definitions involve similar concepts, although it seems that the Japanese version places greater emphasis on the active participation of local people and organizations, and

also specifically includes historical aspects.

Both of the above organizations, and indeed the term ecotourism itself, are relatively new. Although there was a slow movement over a few decades before the concept became clearly crystallized, the Ecotourism Society (later to become the International Ecotourism Society) was only formed in May 1990 (TIES, date unknown). The Japan Ecotourism Society (JES) was first established in March 1998, and was designated as a non-profit organization by the Cabinet Office in February 2003.

It might be best to appreciate the slight distinction between a “nature tour” and an “ecotour”. The Japan Travel Bureau (JTB) explains that the former infers, for example, going and looking at some mountain scenery, whereas the latter may include studying the nature and also experiencing the lifestyles of the local people and the related culture. They also point out that this might be attractive to foreign visitors (JTB 2019a).

In practical terms ecotourism is essentially tourism that is usually conducted in natural areas, includes educational aspects, respects local culture, and is conducted in a manner that results in the minimum possible impact on the environment.

Positive impacts of ecotourism

Ecotourism can have numerous positive impacts (Ministry of the Environment 2003). First, ecotourism can help to meet the needs of tourists by offering “experience” tours, and help satisfy the intellectual curiosity of adult tourists. For urban children, they provide an opportunity to experience “real” nature.

Second, ecotourism can benefit the tourist industry. Tourist numbers may increase, the participants may stay longer, and there may be an increase in the number of repeat visitors. Furthermore, it may help to smooth out fluctuations in tourist numbers in the different seasons.

Third, it can contribute to the preservation of the environment and nature by raising the consciousness of tourists concerning environmental conservation and by raising the consciousness of the local people regarding the need to save resources.

Fourth, it can help to revitalize local communities by having a beneficial economic effect on local industries and by providing vitality to the local residents, but without costing large sums of money. This point is extremely important when considering the increasingly dire situation facing rural communities in Japan. In recent years the trend towards urbanization has resulted in many younger people leaving the countryside for the cities, with the rural areas losing vitality, and leaving an insufficient number of people who are available to take care of the fields etc.. Indeed, a 2006 survey by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (MLIT) regarded 62,273 communities as “under-populated” with 2,634 of them (4.2%) expected to soon die out (Jansson and Mikkola 2016: 4–5). The movement of people away from pursuing agriculture in the countryside has been exacerbated by the fact that transport links are being lost due to a lack of passengers, making it too expensive for farmers to deliver their products to the cities (Jansson and Mikkola 2016: 35). An additional problem is the loss of female residents; in many rural communities, the number of women in the 30–34 age group is considerably lower than that of men, and women from outside are often reluctant to move to the countryside. Local women may leave to further their education but often do not want to return because they believe that gender

equality is much better in the cities (Jansson and Mikkola 2016: 35–36). Jobs in ecotourism might help to mitigate this situation as well as help to achieve the government’s aim of revitalization of the regions.

Sustainable tourism

Sustainable tourism is similar to ecotourism but tends to refer to a wider scale in that it refers to a vision in which all aspects of tourism should be sustainable. The Japan Ecotourism Centre (2018: 1–4) stated that with the rapid growth of tourism worldwide, mass tourism in places such as World Heritage sites and natural sightseeing spots has led to environmental destruction, and unplanned development has led to the destruction of ecosystems. To address this situation in Japan, the central government has become quite active in recent years with the setting up of a centre for promoting sustainable tourism. The rapid increase in the number of visitors is having a negative effect on people’s lives in regional areas and also on the natural environment, while at the same time reducing the satisfaction of the tourists and the quality of the sightseeing location. The difficulty is how to alleviate the “overtourism” and “sightseeing pollution” while at the same time achieving regional revitalization.

In April 2018 the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (MLIT) published a report entitled “Survey of how to operate sustainable tourism”, which emphasized the necessity of including economic factors, regional society, and the environment in any policies to be formulated, and stressed the need for local residents to be satisfied with their lives (Japan Ecotourism Centre 2018: 1–4).

During the period 2014–2019 the Japan Ecotourism Centre (2018: 1–4) carried out activities aimed at raising the level of sustainable tourism in Japan to the international standard, and with this aim held a number of forums, beginning in Nara (2014), and followed by Kumano, Wakayama prefecture (2015), Oze, Gunma prefecture (2016), Akita (2017) and also in Nagasaki prefecture (2017). Over this five-year period there was cooperation between the MLIT Research Institute, the Tourism Agency, the Ministry of the Environment, and the Japan Association for the Promotion of Tourism, and this meant that the standards of international sustainable tourism began to appear achievable with the creation of model sites that would be good to both visit and live in (Japan Ecotourism Centre 2018: 1–4).

Ecotourism destinations in Japan

An internet search for ecotourism destinations in Japan immediately brings up four locations that are all well-known for nature. Three of them are in or near Okinawa: Yakushima (for cedars, waterfalls and the Arakawa trail); Ishigaki (Maezeto beach, mountains and blue coral); and Irimote Island (Pinaisaara waterfall, jungles, coral reefs and mangrove forests). [The island of Yakushima is actually in Kagoshima prefecture, but is situated between Kyushu and Okinawa]. The fourth location is Ogasawara, which is part of metropolitan Tokyo (For persons not familiar with Japan who might be surprised at the inclusion of a Tokyo site as a nature destination, it should be pointed out that these islands are actually located a full 1,000 kilometres from the mainland) (Travel Wire Asia 2015). These islands are noteworthy for scuba diving, dolphins, whales and sea turtles (Google, date unknown). In Ogasawara, as well as ecotours being organized, voluntary restrictions were also established for the protection of whales; that is, boats should reduce speed when within 300 metres of whales, and should not come closer than 100 metres of the creatures themselves (Ogasawara Islands Nature Information Center 2007). (There

are, of course, numerous other possible destinations for appreciating nature, e.g. the pristine lakes and wetlands of Hokkaido).

Four Japanese locations sites have also been designated as World Heritage natural sites. The locations and dates of designation are Yakushima (1993), Shirakami-Sanchi in northern Honshu (1993), Shiretoko in Hokkaido (2005) and the Ogasawara Islands (2011). In addition, the Japanese government included Amami-Oshima Island, Tokunoshima Island, the northern part of Okinawa Island, and Iriomote Island in a Tentative List of World Heritage sites in 2016 (UNESCO 2018).

There is one other site in Japan which is well-known for nature: Mt. Fuji. After several attempts by the Japanese government to have the mountain designated as a World Natural Heritage site, Mt. Fuji was finally approved as a World Heritage site in 2013 (BBC 2013). However, it did not receive this recognition as a natural site, but rather as a cultural site, with UNESCO saying that the volcano had “inspired artists and poets and been the object of pilgrimage for centuries”. The designation had been in some doubt because of environmental problems; after the announcement, some people thought the problems concerning waste (such as the amount of toilet paper strewn on the mountain sides and leakage of human waste from the toilets, as well as the large number of discarded cans) had been solved. However, the famous alpinist Noguchi Ken made it clear that this was not the case (Japan Times 2014). Indeed, there were fears that the World Heritage designation might be withdrawn if the problems were not adequately addressed.

The problems of Mt. Fuji are due to the great attraction of climbing what is regarded as a sacred mountain, the highest in Japan; indeed, there is an expression that states that it is a wise man that climbs Mt. Fuji once. Making matters worse is the fact that almost all climbers try for the summit during the relatively short official climbing season of July and August. (It should be noted that some websites are wrong in declaring that climbing outside of this period is prohibited; in other months, the main access road, shops and mountain huts etc. will indeed be closed, but it is still possible – and completely legal – to climb at other times of the year, although a trained guide with proper equipment is necessary in the winter months. In fact, one of the authors (Brian Harrison) did this in late January one year). The numbers of climbers are considerable, often amounting to around 300,000 people per year. Numbers rose steadily until 2010; although there was a dip in the years following 2012, since 2015 numbers have again been climbing, possibly due to the publicity gained by the mountain in achieving World Heritage status. This means that the environmental problems could get worse in the future (Statista.com, date unknown).

It should be pointed out that ecotourism is not limited to merely nature-based tours. There are also tours that focus on experiencing local lifestyles (e.g. the traditional rice-farming community of Sumi in Masuda in Shimane prefecture); learning about the culture and history of a specific location; and supporting locally based industries (Ecotourism Japan, date unknown). Tours may also include various types of environmental education and visits to agricultural projects.

Besides some of the well-known destinations described above, there are several locations that are not famous where efforts to promote ecotourism have been recognized by the national government (these are discussed further in the section “Efforts by local communities”).

Perhaps rather surprisingly, there are also ecotours that operate in the centre of Tokyo. Indeed, one

of these proved so successful that the operators received a special award in the 8th Ecotourism Grand Prize competition in 2009, and won the award outright in 2013 (Enjoy Eco School, date unknown, a) (This award will be explained further in the section “Efforts by local communities”). According to the Japan Ecotourism Society (JES) their success with their waterfront tours was due to three factors, i.e. being a good example of urban tourism, continuously working hard to promote urban ecotourism, and because of utilizing an electrically powered boat so as to be ecofriendly in a multitude of ways (Japan Ecotourism Society 2013). This particular ecotour is run by an NPO known as “Enjoy Eco School”. Founded in November 2005, the NPO began the tour the following year sailing on the Kanda and Nihonbashi rivers at a time when few boats were sailing there because for many years the waterfront had a very bad image of being dirty and smelly (Enjoy Eco School, date unknown, b). They later expanded to include tours in the Onagi river area and also in the Tennouzu and Shibaura areas. Besides running tours, they also contribute to cleanup activities.

Market size of ecotourism in Japan

In 2011, the Japan Tourism Agency carried out a survey about the relatively new types of tourism that had emerged (Japan Tourism Agency, 2012: 29–30). Besides ecotourism, the new types of tourism included industrial tourism, green tourism (which focuses on agriculture and fisheries), health tourism and cultural tourism. The estimated size of the market size for ecotourism was 59 billion yen, which accounted for 16.9% of the whole new tourism market. The number of participants was estimated to be about 555,000 and thus accounted for 21.4% of the numbers involved in the new types of tourism. It was also found that the market for ecotourism had increased slightly compared to the previous years.

In one respect, the size of the market seems surprisingly large considering the relative lack of awareness about ecotourism (this will be discussed further in the section “Awareness of ecotourism in Japan”). On the other hand, the figures for ecotourism are dwarfed by the data for both industrial tourism and cultural tourism.

Awareness of ecotourism in Japan

a) By local governments

According to a survey carried out in 2014 by the Ministry of the Environment, 45.3% of the municipalities replied that they had taken, or would like to take, actions to promote ecotourism. The reasons given were the promotion of tourism in general (90%), revitalization of the local area (80%), and environmental protection (50%). However, a majority of respondents (54.7%) stated they were uninterested, citing the reasons of a human resource problem (50%), a lack of knowledge (50%) or a budget shortage (40%). Moreover, of those local governments that wished to promote ecotourism approximately 80% admitted that they did not have a council for ecotourism. This clearly highlights the need for the government to provide more assistance.

b) By private operators

The ministry also carried out a survey in 2013 with the private groups that operate ecotours. Approximately half of them stated that they were experiencing difficulty with securing and managing

staff resources. In addition, around 30% said that the tours were attracting less than the desired number of participants, which they attributed to a lack of commercialization and advertising (Ministry of the Environment 2015: 5).

c) By the general public

Surveys carried out in the years following 2006 found that during a six-year period there was indeed a growing recognition of ecotourism but that the increase was slow and the overall knowledge by the general public was very low. This was attributed to several causes, specifically a lack of explanation of ecotourism to tourists; insufficient recognition of ecotourism by travel agencies; poor methods of informing the general public about the concept of ecotourism; and improper use of the term ecotourism itself (Meeting for Investigation of Ecotourism 2011).

In September 2014, the Japanese Cabinet Office published the results of a survey about environmental problems which included a number of questions related to ecotourism (Cabinet Office, Government of Japan 2014). The rather shocking finding was that still only 13.8% of respondents said that they knew the meaning of ecotourism. Although 28.4% said that they had heard the term “ecotour”, a full 56.7% stated that they had never heard of it. The rate for young people in their 20s was even worse, and the number of people who said that they had in fact participated in an ecotour was a mere 3.6%.

The survey also inquired about the types of ecotour that might be attractive to the respondents. Interestingly, the replies concerning their own interests were markedly different from the types of tours they would like their children to experience. For the adults, the most attractive type of tour would be one that included an explanation of history and culture (for example, a tour of historic sites or hiking in the mountains). This was followed by tours that focused on indigenous nature, and third was the reply that an attractive tour would be one in which it would be possible to experience local living and culture. Nevertheless, a full 25.7% stated that they had no interest at all in taking part in an ecotour.

However, when it came to recommending tours for children, the most popular answer was to choose tours in which the children could experience agriculture. The second most popular option was the observation of indigenous nature, and the third was a tour that included historical and cultural aspects. The agricultural option was especially favoured by respondents who lived in cities.

In 2019 JTB carried out a survey related to travel and environmental conservation (JTB 2019b), with 62% replying that they always (or sometimes) think about conservation in the places they visit. Furthermore, 43% replied in the affirmative regarding participation in a tour in which they would learn about environmental preservation; giving a donation towards environmental conservation activities at their destination; or participating in such activities themselves. They therefore expressed a positive attitude, which was an improvement over the results of the 2014 government survey. As a result, JTB decided to establish small group tours in various parts of Japan in order to experience such matters as described above, while coming into contact with the lives of local residents and learning about why they perform the activities they do and what they hope will be the situation there in the future, etc..

Although 58.2% of respondents expressed a wish to develop their community through ecotourism, many replies were negative about this, citing that they were too busy, that they did not have confidence in their physical strength, or that they could not think of ecotours that would be attractive.

These extremely disappointing findings suggest that the Japanese government needs to adopt measures that can promote ecotourism, and that companies and local communities need to make efforts to reflect people's interests.

Efforts to promote ecotourism in Japan

a) Efforts by the Japanese government

In 2008 the Japanese government passed a law to promote ecotourism (Ministry of the Environment, 2011: 10–12). This was based on four principles, i.e. consideration for the environment, a contribution to promotion of the tourism industry, a contribution to regional development, and the introduction of environmental education. In order to support these aims, the government pledged to help in areas such as community support, human resources development and public relations.

First, regarding community support, the government provides subsidies to some communities that are involved in the promotion of ecotourism. In 2015 the government provided up to 50% of the expenditures for 18 separate organizations. Equally important, the government dispatches expert advisors to provide advice tailored to the needs of the individual communities.

Second, the government tries to develop the human resources of the communities promoting ecotourism by conducting training sessions based on a curriculum put together by operators, experts and the ministry. This covers not only ecotourism issues such as learning about local natural tourist resources, history and traditions, but also includes topics such as resource management, planning, public relations and business management.

Third, the government carries out public relations exercises to help promote ecotourism. In 2003, the Ministry of the Environment held an “ecotourism promotion meeting” which proposed five plans aimed at spreading the understanding of ecotourism, expanding the regions and businesses that actively work with ecotourism, and increasing the demand for ecotourism. Perhaps the most significant of these are the “Complete guide to ecotours” and the “Ecotourism Grand Prize”. The former of these is a compilation of domestic ecotour operators, together with a description of their tour contents and the ecofriendly activities. The “Ecotourism Grand Prize” is an effort to reward ecotour operators, organizations and local governments for outstanding contributions to ecotourism. The aim is to increase motivation and the exchange of information (Ministry of the Environment, date unknown, a, b). The other plans that were proposed were an ecotourism charter (aimed at spreading the principles of ecotourism in a simple manner); an ecotourism promotion manual (explaining some key methods of promoting ecotourism successfully); and an ecotourism model business plan which could help in the development of ecotourism projects operated by local governments.

The Ecotourism Grand Prize is an annual award accredited by the Minister of the Environment, and has a very beneficial effect, as shown by the fact that each year one-third of the entries come from new programmes (Ecotourism.gr.jp, date unknown: 7–9). Student symposia for 2nd to 4th year university students (including participation by foreign exchange students) are held with both lectures and poster sessions; these used to take place in Tokyo, but for the first time one recently took place in Shiga prefecture (Ecotourism.gr.jp, date unknown: 9–11).

In June 2018 the Centre for the Promotion of Sustainable Tourism was established by the Japan

Tourism Agency within the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (MLIT), and a report on how to proceed published one year later (Japan Tourism Agency 2019: 8). The first meeting of the *Jizoku kanou na kankou shihyou ni kansuru kentoukai* (The Investigative Committee on Sustainable Tourism Indicators) was held in August 2019 because sightseeing was seen as a major factor in future strategic growth, especially with the significant increases in foreign visitors seen in recent years expected to continue, with a prediction of 40 million visitors by 2020 and 60 million by 2030 (although, of course, the 2020 figure did not materialize due to the coronavirus pandemic) (Japan Tourism Agency 2019: 1). The stated aim was to enable Japan to become an “advanced nation” in terms of sustainable tourism (Japan Tourism Agency 2019: 10).

The reference that was used was guidelines issued by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) in 2004, which emphasized three aspects: the optimization of tourism resources; respect for the host community from the sociocultural viewpoint; and the guarantee of long-term economic activity (Japan Tourism Agency 2019: 15). In 2008 over 50 countries formed an organization known as the Global Sustainable Tourism Council to establish international standards (Japan Tourism Agency 2019: 16). A total of 13 separate indicators of sustainable development for tourism destinations were given: the well-being of the local community; preservation of the cultural resources; having the local community participate in tourism planning; satisfaction on the part of the tourists; health and safety; the acquisition of economic benefit from the tourism; preservation of the precious natural resources; management of rare natural resources; mitigation of any negative effects of tourism; management of tourism activities; planning and management of tourism areas; planning of commercial tourism products and services; and sustainability of tourism management and services (Japan Tourism Agency 2019: 62). The state of affairs is monitored by the UNWTO International Network of Sustainable Tourism Observatories. In 2019 there were 25 of these in 12 countries (Japan Tourism Agency 2019: 67); none were in Japan, although one UNWTO office did exist in the country (Japan Tourism Agency 2019: 60). The group set up by the Japan Tourism Agency aimed at establishing a Japanese version of sustainable indicators by March 2020 (Japan Tourism Agency 2019: 71).

It is not only the national government that has been involved. As one example, let us consider the situation in Okinawa, a major destination for tourism. From 1972 to 2018 Okinawa experienced a significant growth in tourist numbers from approximately 560,000 to 9,580,000. During the period up to 2012 the growth was steady and the vast majority of visitors were Japanese nationals, with the total number of tourists approximately 6 million. However, in the following 6 years there was an explosive increase of more than 50%, with foreign tourists (mainly from East Asia) accounting for the majority (in 2018 the number of foreign tourists was 2,690,000). The economic benefits have been considerable, with revenues rising 21.5 times over 1974–2018 to 697.9 billion yen (Okinawa Prefectural Government 2018: 9).

With regard to ecotourism, in the last few years the number of Japanese tourists participating in ecotours has remained steady, averaging around 90,000 per year. In contrast, though, the number of foreign participants joining such tours has risen dramatically, from 64,000 in 2014 to 443,000 in 2018. It thus seems likely that foreign tourists will continue to be a major market for the Okinawan ecotourism sector. The Okinawan prefectural government had aimed at achieving 10 million tourists and an income of 1 trillion yen by 2018; with the increase in inbound (foreign) tourists, the target for 2023 was adjusted

to 12 million tourists and an income of 1.1 trillion yen (Okinawa Prefectural Government 2018: 10). The considerable increase in tourist numbers has, however, created some potential problems that will have to be addressed, specifically the over-concentration of visitors in certain areas, environmental conservation and user management policies etc (Okinawa Prefectural Government 2018: 19). Another worry is that there are no legal regulations concerning the industry and to have good standards it will be necessary to establish an accreditation system for operators and guides (Okinawa Prefectural Government 2018: 24).

b) Efforts by local communities

Local communities that wish to carry out ecotourism activities may establish so-called ecotourism promotion councils that can then apply for accreditation from the government (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries 2010). As of June 2016, seven separate organizations had been certified. These organizations and the activities they promoted were as follows (Ministry of the Environment 2016):

- Tanigawadake (Gunma prefecture) (trekking, study of geographical features, study of the history of Shimizu mountain pass, star watching and wildlife observation).
- Hanno city (Saitama prefecture) (visiting a sake brewery, hiking, food tourism, forest bathing and craft experiences, visiting old folk houses, and agricultural experiences).
- Nantan-shi Miyama (Kyoto prefecture) (deer hunting and slaughter, straw work experience, temple experiences, and trekking).
- Toba city (Mie prefecture) (observations using glass-bottomed boats, snorkelling, fishing tours, trips to uninhabited islands, and off-street strolling).
- Nabari city (Mie prefecture) (satoyama trips, ascetic practices of sitting under waterfalls, hikes to observe the changing leaves in autumn, visiting icefalls in winter, and watching ninja training exercises).
- Tokashiki and Zamami villages (Okinawa prefecture) (whale watching, sea kayaking, scuba diving and snorkelling).
- Ogasawara (Tokyo prefecture) (whale watching, dolphin watching, trekking, night tours, diving and sea kayaking).

It needs to be added that only some of these activities would fit into the more widely accepted definitions of ecotourism.

c) Efforts by companies

These efforts have been mainly, but not exclusively, carried out by travel agents. In the 1980s ecotourism was generally considered as a niche product because of the need for good guides and a restriction on the number of participants, and the fact that they were viewed as being hard trips that might involve walking in remote mountainous areas. Nevertheless, in 1985 the Japan Travel Bureau (JTB) began a campaign to beautify sightseeing spots and conserve tourism resources. Later, in 2002, they started to offer tours called “Fabre”, targeted at customers who were interested in environmental issues and contact with nature. Beginning in 2008, they launched ecofriendly tours called “Love Earth” which aimed at increasing people’s consciousness regarding environmental problems. As a further envi-

ronmental contribution they introduced a carbon offset system (Kato 2011: 238-242).

H.I.S., the second largest travel agent in Japan, has also made efforts to promote ecotourism, and offers ecotours both domestically and internationally. This includes tours that are specially tailored for lone travelers.

A few other companies have also become involved in ecotourism. For example, the company known as Picchio was established by Hoshino Yoshihara, the president of Hoshino Resorts, in 1992 and became an independent company in 2003 (Midori no goo, date unknown; Picchio 2010). They were quite successful, and indeed in 2005 became the first winner of the Ecotourism Grand Prize established by the Ministry of the Environment. They offer various activities and also run projects aimed at wildlife conservation (e.g. to protect black bears) and environmental education, plus ecotourism support projects.

d) Efforts by NPOs

NPOs also play a very important role in promoting ecotourism, with the most representative being the Japan Ecotourism Society, which as mentioned previously was established in 1998 and received government accreditation in 2003 (Japan Ecotourism Society (JES), date unknown). Their main activities are the holding of four events, viz. the JES forum (which sponsors guest lectures), an ecotourism café, staff training sessions (to train ecotour guides), and symposia for university students to both study and present their own research. There are, of course, many smaller organizations involved with ecotours, as can be seen from the examples discussed previously.

Training of guides

Masaka et al (2011: 217) state that a guide for an ecotour needs to fulfill eight functions, i.e. to act as a guide; to educate participants about the nature and culture; to follow a code of conduct towards the tourists; to raise the awareness about how to protect the nature; to enable communication between the local people and the visitors; to help with the monitoring and conservation management of the resources; and to help transmit information about the regional nature, culture and ecotour programmes to people from outside the region.

Of course, these guides need to undergo a certain degree of training. One possible weakness of the current system in Japan is that there is no standardized system for doing this and then examining the trainees. This is perhaps due to the fairly small number of guides in Japan, and also because there is a feeling that the knowledge needed varies greatly between different regions (hence leading to a system of "regional authorization").

One problem is that ecotourism activities tend to be concentrated in the large urban conurbations, and in the regions there is still a strong feeling that guiding is a job for women only. Indeed, a report by MLIT found that in 2012 the percentage of female workers in tourism nationally was 57.5% (MLIT 2015). It seems likely that in the regions the figure might be higher.

Furthermore, there is a big discrepancy in wages, with many rural salaries being around 2 million yen or less. It is felt that nurturing professional guides would lead to greater realization about the attractions of the regions, and then result in more repeat visitors (Ecotourism.gr.jp, date unknown: 3-4). It is also believed essential that travel insurance covers operations so that participants will feel

completely safe; such a proposal was slow to get off the ground, but began in 2009 and is recording an annual growth in double figures. For a similar reason it is felt that accreditation by a third party is needed, possibly with the issuing of a logo showing that a certain ecotour meets good standards, thereby providing added value to the product and distinguishing it from other tours (Ecotourism.gr.jp, date unknown: 5-6).

Several regions have indeed started their own training programmes e.g. Okinawa, Hokkaido, Fukushima, Kanagawa and Tokyo. The system in Hokkaido, for example, was started in 2002 and is open to all; besides doing the study, the programme requires would-be guides to undertake both practical and written examinations. In Tokyo, however, the only training provided is for ecotours in Ogasawara. This started in 2003 and is open only to people over 18 years old who have lived on the islands for at least one year; the training course then lasts 6 days (Tokyo Metropolitan Government, date unknown).

Besides governmental training programmes, some NPOs also perform a similar function; one NPO that does this is the Japanese Ecotourism Society (Japan Ecotourism Society, date unknown). Another training institution is the Council for Outdoor and Nature Experiences (CONE) (Masaka et al. 2011: 220).

Japanese tourist targets

The national government in Japan has in recent years aimed at greatly increasing the number of tourists coming to the country from abroad, so-called “inbound tourists”, and set a target of attracting 40 million visitors annually by the year 2020 (JTB 2019a).

In 2018 a survey by the Tourism Agency found that only about 10% of foreign visitors join tours to experience Japan’s four seasons or have nature experiences, or to experience agricultural or fishing villages (Suzuki 2019). Suzuki therefore suggests that in order to reach the target of 40 million visitors per year, it is necessary to raise the profile of ecotourism, and by referring to how Costa Rica is able to attract many foreign tourists because of the attractiveness of their natural environment such as tropical rainforests, volcanoes, wild birds, sea turtles etc., argues that a similar approach is needed in Japan. He points out, however, that various problems exist such as the lack of information and publicity available in foreign languages, the paucity of people able to conduct guiding in foreign languages, and the lack of wifi facilities. He therefore urges the Tourism Agency and local authorities, travel agents and local groups to try and tackle the above problems and promote ecotourism.

It is believed that many Western tourists are interested in various things in Japan in winter, including watching the birds that arrive, which occurs in what Japanese tend to think of as the off-season. This represents an opportunity, with somebody needed as a go-between to match the wishes of tourists and local conditions (Ecotourism.gr.jp, date unknown: 6-7).

Case studies

Let us now consider a number of case studies.

a) Gifu

The local tourist association in Gero (Gifu prefecture) carried out an advertising campaign centred around having an ecotourism “destination marketing organization” (DMO), which is an organization that

promotes a location as an attractive travel destination (previously these would be referred to by names such as tourist board or visitors bureau). In 2017 succeeded in their aim of attracting 1.1 million guests. It is thought that such an approach could help Japan achieve the target for 2020 in Japan of having 40 million inbound tourists; the possible problem is a lack of accommodation, but it is believed that this can be resolved by spreading the influx over more of the year and including more places – and here, ecotourism will play an important role (JTB 2019a).

b) Aomori

There has been a successful ecotourism project in Aomori prefecture at Oirase, near Lake Towada (JTB 2019c). There developed a need to remedy the falling number of tourists by having attractions to make visitors want to stay longer, so they focused on the unique local moss.

c) Okinawa

In 2008, the local government on the island of Miyakojima in Okinawa announced their “Eco-island Miyakojima declaration”. The result was an increase in the number of tourists visiting the island, but problems developed such as throwing away litter and deterioration of the environment, and thus there were symptoms of overtourism. To mitigate this situation, a crowd-funding project was started to raise funds for the publication of an “Eco-island passport” aimed at producing common tourism manners and consequently make the development of the island sustainable. The campaign aimed to raise just over 2 million yen in a two-month period beginning in mid-January 2020 (Jiji.com 2019).

d) Islands (Ogasawara, Iriomote Island, Yakushima, Amami Oshima)

Of the above four islands, two have been officially registered as World Heritage sites (Yakushima and Ogasawara), and these are the two most advanced in terms of ecotourism. The former, which is the easiest to travel to, has received the greater effect from the registration, and as a result ecotourism there has been boosted and promoted. An additional effect was that this has greatly changed the local people’s understanding of their island (Song and Kuwahara 2016: 22-23). The number of visitors to Yakushima rose only slightly in the period 1971-1988 (from about 7,000 to 12,000), but in the campaign for World Natural Heritage status and after the registration, tourism grew at a remarkable rate, peaking at over 400,000 by 2007 (although it has dropped since then) (Song and Kuwahara 2016: 12).

In Ogasawara there has been a good balance between the efforts made by the private sector and local administration compared with the other three examples being discussed. The overall impact on nature has been quite low, possibly due to the fact that the islands are remote (about 25 hours by boat from Tokyo), which means that the tourists are most likely highly motivated and would be careful to act in an appropriate manner (Song and Kuwahara 2016: 22-23).

Song and Kuwahara (2016: 22-23) state that on Iriomote Island ecotourism began relatively early but has suffered from poor management of environmental preservation and institutionalization, although World Natural Heritage status might help the situation. Similarly, they believe that ecotourism could be improved on Amami Oshima, with both Amami Oshima and Iriomote Island in a position to learn greatly from the experiences of Yakushima and the Ogasawara Islands.

e) Lake Akan and Kushiro (Hokkaido)

Lake Akan is situated near the port city of Kushiro in eastern Hokkaido. It is a place where it is possible to escape the summer heat that exists in the rest of Japan and where the Kushiro Shitsugen national park is Japan's largest marshland and known for crane-viewing. The lake is listed as a Ramsar site in accordance with the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance (also known as the Convention on Ramsar, named after the city of that name in Iran, where the convention was signed in 1971); it is a treaty related to rural wetlands. Lake Akan is in an area of beautiful natural scenery, with the volcanic activity in the area resulting in a number of high-quality hot springs. The lake is also home to the rare marimo algae balls which were designated a national monument in 1921 and then given the status of special natural treasure in 1952 (Livejapan.com 2020).

The region around Lake Akan is already a well-established tourist destination, but the average stay of foreign tourists is only 1.05 nights, effectively meaning that Kushiro is just an overnight stay. The local people sought to encourage visitors to stay longer, and decided to target well-off Japan-loving Westerners fond of adventure travel. It was decided that this necessitated the involvement of profit-making enterprises, and talks were arranged between conservation groups and local residents, resulting in April 2018 in the establishment of a "destination marketing organization" (DMO) (Japan Tourism Agency 2018: 48–49).

The way to encourage foreign visitors to stay longer in the area, including the appeal to repeat visitors, was believed to be the development and offering of guided tours that included hitherto closed areas, as well as incorporating experiences of the myths etc. connected with the rich culture of the local indigenous Ainu population. The myths are explained in the form of state-of-the-art digital art, enabling visitors to experience the forest at night. In Kushiro they added attractions such as rafting in kayaks and canyoning. The number of foreign tourists has been growing rapidly in recent years; although only 92,075 came in 2014, two years later the figure had grown to 137,697 (Japan Tourism Agency 2018: 48–49).

f) Hida area, Gifu prefecture

In this area, attempts were made to establish a "*Satoyama* experience" brand for tourism. The term "*satoyama*" refers to the border zone or area between mountain foothills and arable flat land, which is typified by having developed over the centuries due to small-scale agricultural and forestry use (Wikipedia 2019). Utilizing this previously unexploited travel resource, it was hoped to attract foreign tourists while simultaneously promoting sustainable tourism. Tours started in the Hida area in 2009 introducing nature, local traditions and life. Besides their flagship cycling tour of the *satoyama* area with a local guide, they also promoted a walking tour called the "Food and Culture walking tour" during which the tourists had the chance to sample local dishes, as well as to attend a programme of cooking with a cooking researcher. In winter they established a snowshoe tour around an agricultural village, thereby being able to have sustainable businesses with year-round offerings (Japan Tourism Agency 2018: 50–51).

The beginning part of the development was the amalgamation of 4 towns and villages in 2004 to form Hida city. However, in comparison with nearby sightseeing spots, the tourist industry was not so

big and was not unified. In 2007 an adviser was appointed who set up a guided cycling tour combining old city centre streets with the surrounding agricultural area. It involved the cooperation of local people with local enterprises (Japan Tourism Agency 2018: 50–51).

The business approach was to adopt usual management methods and follow the practice of PDCA (the 4-step management method used in business for the control and continuous improvement of process and products; the letters PDCA stand for “plan, do, check, act”). Their specific target was individual Western travellers who had already visited the region. Local residents became actively involved, and the activities helped to preserve the area as well as increasing its wealth. The process took time, especially at the beginning, as they relied on visitors spreading the information by word of mouth. Gradually, though, they achieved good results. On the travel review website TripAdvisor as of March 2018, they received the most reviews of anywhere in Japan in the area of activities in rural areas (798), with 747 of the tourists giving the top possible review mark; in addition, they were awarded the website’s “Certificate of Excellence” for 6 years in a row. It was found that Westerners then tended to stay longer in the area and spent more money, leading to a staff increase from 2 to more than 10 workers, with about 40 people moving into the area. In the years 2012–2016, the number of tour participants went up steadily from 900 to 3,400 (Japan Tourism Agency 2018: 50–51).

g) Toyooka city (Hyogo prefecture)

The city of Toyooka has become known for its programme of so-called “stork tourism”, enabling visitors to see the last habitat for storks, as their numbers have been dropping with the deterioration of the environment. A facility is operated to enable visitors to observe storks, and educational activities have aimed at facilitating the return of more birds, as well as conservation activities in the wetlands, which have been designated as a Ramsar site. Tourism was carried out with Toyooka as the centre of the ecotours, but in the future this will be handled by the tourism section of a DMO company known as Toyooka Tourism Innovation. The efforts to achieve the return of the storks was highly evaluated globally, which led to the Ramsar wetlands designation in 2012. However, local people recognize that more needs to be done (Japan Tourism Agency 2018: 52–53).

As part of the activities in Toyooka, they stopped using agricultural chemicals, and following this various birds returned to the area, including about 80 storks. For publicity, they launched the “Stork Rice” brand, and this attracted tourists. The decision proved to be an excellent one, with the financial rewards estimated to be 1 billion yen per year (JTB 2019c).

Businesses have taken part in stork preservation activities as part of their CSR (corporate social responsibility) efforts, and ecotours have been established with overnight stays in nearby Shirosaki hot springs, with participation by both public agencies and at the non-governmental level. Students who join the tours learn about the stork preservation activities, and this has led to an increase in the number of student volunteers. Over the period 2011–2016, annual visitor numbers were fairly stable around the 4 million mark. To appeal to foreign tourists, pamphlets have been prepared in English. Regarding the future, more English-speaking guides will be sought, and there are plans to have multi-lingual displays (Japan Tourism Agency 2018: 52–53).

h) Saga city (Saga prefecture)

Saga prides itself on being a “biomass industrial city” based on its having unique facilities for the treatment of rubbish and sewage. They would like to build on this reputation and boost both environmental conservation and economic development. In June 2017 the city created a website together with the Saga Tourism Association with the aim of promoting consumption within the city and establishing an efficient tour encompassing visits to both a cleaning factory (the central facility for making practical use of biomass) and the sewage treatment centre; the two had previously been viewed as being completely independent. The city hoped to create an attractive biomass tour culminating in a visit to local restaurants that offered local delicacies (Japan Tourism Agency 2018: 54–55).

The particularly interesting aspect of the cleaning factory is that rubbish is combusted with the resultant CO₂ removed from the effluent gases and then used for the cultivation of seaweed and for agriculture. In the case of the sewage treatment plant, the sludge which is produced is converted into fertilizer and the biogas is used for generating electricity. These efforts led to the city winning the Grand Prix in the “Low Carbon Cup 2017”, which drew national attention. It also resulted in a significant change in the image of the facilities; local residents had previously viewed the facilities as being problematic, but this changed as a result of advertising campaigns and the circulating of resources (treated water, heat, CO₂, fertilizer, and electricity generation) (Japan Tourism Agency 2018: 54–55).

Both of the above facilities would each attract approximately 2,000 visitors annually, but Saga city’s promotion of an overall biomass industry faced the significant problem in that the two facilities are separated by a considerable distance. They hoped to somehow overcome this hurdle, which would result in visitors spending longer in the city than if they went to only one of the facilities, which would then presumably result in greater revenue. Problems also occurred because the tours had to be conducted by the workers at the facilities, but this was difficult because of the small numbers of workers, and became increasingly so as the number of visits increased. Therefore tours became limited to certain days with minimum visitor numbers required (Japan Tourism Agency 2018: 54–55).

With regard to the future, Saga is planning to create a new industry based around seaweed by cultivating an area of 21 hectares, which would rank at the top of the world scale (Japan Tourism Agency 2018: 54–55).

i) Koshikijima (Kagoshima prefecture)

Koshikijima consists of 3 small islands about 30 kilometres off the western coast of Kagoshima prefecture. It has beautiful scenery, various important living things and vegetation, fresh sea food, and boasts a designated “National Intangible Treasure” known as ‘*toshidon*’ (Japan Tourism Agency 2018: 56–57). “*Toshidon*” refers to “the visiting spirits of Koshikijima” and was recognized by UNESCO in November 2018 as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The spirits referred to as *raihoushi* in Japanese, and are masked deities who are believed to make ritual visits on key dates during the year; the *toshidon* in Koshikijima are said to be the earliest of these practices (Nippon.com, date unknown). In addition to the above, Koshikijima is the site of a national park which special sightseeing appeal in the form of geological features.

One of the 3 islands, Shimo-Koshikijima, has the so-called Napoleon Rock, a large offshore outcrop of

rock supposedly resembling the Frenchman's face, and which is the symbol of the island group. It contains many dinosaur fossils and also has numerous sections of exposed rock and strata, described as being one of the best geological sites in Japan, and a must-see for geologists. It is one of the few places in Japan where it is possible to see traces of the Cretaceous period (Matcha-jp.com, date unknown). This led the local people to start to promote tourism in 2009 on the basis of a good environment and unique sites of great geological interest (Japan Tourism Agency 2018: 56-57). Previously there had been no medium for promoting the islands' attractions, with the islanders instead relying on word of mouth. There had been no local concern regarding preservation or utilization of the area's resources, and there were no restaurants or accommodation. In 2013 they set up a local tourism product association, and in March 2015, a "Koshikijima tourist vision" was established with the cooperation of government, civil agencies and local residents, which gradually led to employment opportunities and increased incomes. They were helped by funds from both the national and prefectural governments as part of policies to facilitate regional revitalization (Japan Tourism Agency 2018: 56-57).

The number of visitors over the years 2011-2014 remained stable at just above or below 60,000 per year, but then increased to 74,400 in 2015 and 94,000 in 2016. In 2016-2017 they examined the possibility of establishing a "geopark" in the future, and also decided to attempt to attract foreign tourists by producing audio guides in languages such as English, Chinese and Korean (Japan Tourism Agency 2018: 56-57).

Measures that are needed in the future

The Ministry of the Environment is aware of some of the measures that need to be implemented to help the establishment and continued existence of ecotourism (Ministry of the Environment, 2015: 9-13). Furthermore, at the 20th anniversary forum held by the Japan Ecotourism Association in Yurakucho, Tokyo, on the 2nd and 3rd December, 2019, various speakers emphasized the importance of ecotourism for Japan. The president, Mr. Tagawa, stated that in the future it is vital to convey the intrinsic appeal of the Japanese regions to tourists, and understand the value and importance of preservation as the Japanese form of ecotourism, and furthermore emphasized that it was necessary to act now (Kankou Keizai Shinbun 2019).

However, there are some apparent difficulties that need to be tackled in order to improve the situation regarding ecotourism. One clear problem is the low awareness of ecotourism in general and what it can offer. The national government therefore needs to give greater publicity to the field in general, and also encourage local governments and private operators by explaining clearly what the conditions for ecotours should be and what represents good practices. More publicity should be given to initiatives such as the establishment of the Ecotourism Grand Prize. It is also necessary to continue to conduct surveys in order to assess the degree of success achieved and to identify what still needs to be done.

It is necessary to collect, disseminate and share information. This could involve the use of social networking sites, plus enhancing cooperation with private companies such as travel agents so as to allow closer links between the urban areas and the areas in which ecotourism is being promoted. In addition, there could be more cooperation with educational institutions in order to raise the consciousness of young people towards ecotourism. Examples would be to provide opportunities for students to

construct ecotours and present their findings, and holding classes on ecotourism in urban schools (including the provision of opportunities for the students to participate in ecotours themselves).

In order to promote the continued existence of ecotourism, the government and NPOs should offer general advice and provide examples of successful reference cases to other interested ecotourism promotion areas, which would entail the continued monitoring of natural tourism resources. As it is also necessary to have a range of human resources available, it would be useful to have support for people who would like to work part-time as ecotour guides, including support that would encourage young people from the outside to offer their voluntary services (needless to say, support would also be necessary for local volunteers as well). It is also necessary to increase wages for guides.

Financial support is obviously important. Some could be provided in the form of grants from public and civil agencies. Investment in ecotourism could lead to a continuous source of revenue as this is an area in which growth is occurring, as well as helping to revitalize the struggling rural communities. A further source of revenue could be the beneficiaries of the ecotours, i.e. the tourists themselves. Admission charges to the ecotour areas could be levied and the money used for purpose such as the protection of the natural vegetation and the construction of boardwalks etc.

Conclusion

In Japan ecotourism is still in its infancy and awareness of it is extremely limited. Government help is needed, both in the form of advisory services and the allocation of financial resources. This would provide a range of benefits. It would lessen the impact of humans on the natural environment; raise the consciousness of both tourists and local people towards the environment; and also lead to a stimulation of the tourist industry and local communities in a way that would be sustainable. In order to achieve this, the national government, local communities and the tourist industry will need to work together more in order to promote ecotourism in general.

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