

# Revitalizing local communities through tourism: Contribution of NPO “Hot Nishiki”

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(Abstract)

This paper examines a nonprofit organization contribution to local economic, social and cultural revitalization through tourism activities. A school excursion program and Furusato (Home place) festival at Yamashiro District can be examples of tourism activities in this rural area. These events are currently run by the “Hot Nishiki” nonprofit Organization, the local community and local government. The emphasis of this paper is placed on how the “Hot Nishiki” got involved in the rural tourism in an effort to help local life and revitalization at Yamashiro District. The research concludes that challenges to mitigate the problems of an aging society and depopulation are being made through rural tourism. The paper clarifies the importance of local community support to the development of rural tourism as an approach to make the local community active and contribute to rural revitalization.

Keywords: NPO “Hot Nishiki”, local community, revitalization, rural tourism

## Introduction

The population decline puts rural areas in a difficult situation. Recent years have seen moves to supplement community functions in small scale communities with many elderly people. To regenerate rural areas, it is important to promote initiatives to develop agriculture into a “sixth industry” that can help revitalize rural areas, and thereby improve income levels and increase employment opportunities (MAFF, 2009). The previous research on contemporary problem in Japan’s rural and opportunities in developing rural tourism has been undertaken, research focused on the same area, Yamashiro District. This previous research examined the problems faced at Yamashiro District related to the decline of population and the potential of rural tourism as an alternative to solve the problems facing.

The decreasing population and the aging of society are expected to cause a variety of concerns, including how to maintain affluence amid the decreasing size of the population, how to secure goods and services providers amid a decreasing labor force population, a decline in regional vitality, and an increase in single-person elderly households. Since the decrease in the total population of Japan is unavoidable, it is necessary for the new plan to deal with the problem on the premise of a population decrease (MLIT, 2007).

Regarding to this population problem then this study will examine the efforts of *Hot*

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*Nishiki* nonprofit Organization (NPO) to help the local life in addition to revitalizing local communities and empowering elderly people through tourism. The local community revitalization through tourism at Yamashiro District is defined as the involvement of local communities in attracting visitors to rural areas within a local festival and farm stay program. This paper describes also the “Hot Nishiki” program including the Furusato festival (The Home-land festival), that is held every year and student excursions currently practiced as a form of urban-rural exchange used as a tool for local revitalization at Yamashiro District. This study used a qualitative research approach. The qualitative data or primary data were collected by observation and participatory research.

### **Revitalization of rural communities**

Revitalization has been well defined by the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (MAFF). According to it rural areas form the basis for sustainable agricultural development and serve as the location for fulfillment of agricultural multifunctional roles. To regenerate rural areas, it is important to promote initiatives to develop agriculture into a “sixth industry” that can help revitalize rural areas, and thereby improve income levels and increase employment opportunities.

New policies were instituted in the rural communities of Japan at the end of the 20th century. In 1999, the New Food, Agricultural, and Rural Community Basic Law (New Basic Law) was established to guide rural community policies. The Fifth National Comprehensive Development Plan was put into effect in April 1998. One of the aims of these policies is the revitalization of rural society in Japan. This is because of the observed depopulation in the rural communities brought about by the postwar societal changes, and the desire for a “realization of a vigorous rural society”. In 2010, 268 cities and 508 towns and villages, a total of 776 municipalities or 44.9% of the municipalities in Japan are sparsely depopulated.

The population pyramid of 1950 shows that Japan had a standard-shaped pyramid marked by a broad base. The shape of the pyramid, however, has changed dramatically as both the birth rate and death rate have declined. In 2011, aged population (65 years and over) was 29.75 million, constituting 23.3 percent of the total population and marking a record high. This percentage of elderly in the population is the highest in the world. The speed of aging of Japan's population is much faster than in advanced Western European countries or the U.S.A. Although the aged population in Japan accounted for only 7.1 percent of the total population in 1970, 24 years later in 1994, it had almost doubled in scale to 14.1 percent. In other countries with an aged population, it took 61 years in Italy, 85 years in Sweden, and 115 years in France for the percentage of the elderly to increase from 7 percent to 14 percent of the population. These comparisons clearly highlight the rapid progress of demographic aging in Japan (Statistics Bureau, MIAC).<sup>1</sup>

The Japanese government views tourism as one of the most important economic activities

and is aiming to expand its tourism market. In order to realize this goal, green tourism is positioned as a vital new form of tourism which is to be explored intensively. Moreover, the master plan for tourism states that green tourism should be promoted in order to stimulate the interaction between rural and urban communities. By examining the master plan, one can observe the high expectations towards green tourism, and simultaneously, one can also interpret that the key aim of engaging in green tourism is to revitalize the depopulated rural areas; the master plan clearly states that it will promote the construction of "base facilities" in order to provide "meeting points" for tourists and local people (Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, and Transport, 2007).

This problem is also definitely faced at Yamashiro District where the depopulation and aging are progressing. Yamashiro District population has declined due to depopulation, falling birth rates and aging people. The problems of population at Yamashiro are evident comparing data for a 6-year period. In 2005 the total population was 11,523. It has declined to 10,056 in 2010 (Iwakuni city, 2011). The main reason for depopulation in rural areas is that laborers are searching employment and better education facilities in urban areas. Thus population changes result in decrease of labor force which influences the economic growth at Yamashiro District. In order to solve this problem knowledge and human resources from urban people are also important for rural revitalization (Asamizu, 2013). Table 1 shows that the total number of population is 9717 and the total number of elderly people is 4588. It is clear that currently aging is high at Yamashiro District.

**Table 1. Populatio at Yamashiro District (2013)**

	The number of households	Population	Population 65 years or older
	世帯数	人口	65歳以上人口
Mikawa 美川	698	1257	725
Miwa 美和	2001	4393	1739
Hongo 本郷	560	1018	530
Nishiki 錦	1581	3049	1594
Total 計	4840	9717	4588

Source: Iwakuni branch office.

<sup>1</sup> As retrieved from : <http://www.stat.go.jp/english/> on March 2013

## NPO and Tourism

Japan is reported to have some 500,000 NPOs (as of April 2001). The nonprofit sector includes some 85,000 citizen's voluntary organizations, 26,000 public benefit organizations, over 12,000 social welfare corporations, nearly 70,000 trade unions, about 73,000 political associations, and some 184,000 religious organizations. 40% of NPO workers are not paid (volunteers) and those who are paid receive wages lower than the government or private sector. NPOs are often managed by men, former government officials who retired early (Amenomori, 1993).

NPOs play a vital role to achieve local revitalization in rural Japan. One of the NPO's efforts for local revitalization is to utilize the cultural and ecological resources through developing tourism in rural areas. Green tourism (rural tourism), Japanese rural and farm tourism covering not only agriculture, but also forestry and fisheries, has been promoted by the government of Japan since 1992 to counter to depopulation of rural community and losing competitiveness of agriculture under circumstances of global trade liberalization (Ohe, 2003).

For rural tourism to be successful, collaboration needs to exist amongst entrepreneurs (Wilson et al. 2001). Useful integrated approaches to rural studies include acknowledging the importance of locally controlled agendas to reach centralization, awareness of the benefits for shared ideas and funding developments, and creating appropriate tourism plans for rural areas (MacDonald and Jolliffe, 2003). Benefits for rural regions engaging in tourism include: participating in a rapidly growing industry; access to a wide range of relatively inexpensive job creation opportunities; diversifying local economies; benefiting from potentially significant economic multiplier effects; and, increasing awareness and support for preserving natural and cultural heritage sites (Hjalager, 1996). Yokoyama (1998) points out that in general, green tourism in Japan is understood as a form of tourism which is supposed to promote "interaction between urban and rural communities through agricultural experiences and farm inns that provide such services. The development of rural tourism at Yamashiro District is a form of interaction between tourists and local communities.

The touristic potential of Yamashiro District offers resources, which can be classified into two groups, namely ecological and socio-cultural ones. The ecological resources are represented by the natural conditions and local agriculture. They have potential to develop as tourist attractions, which makes all of the forms of nature and agriculture as the main object. Agriculture provides the main mean of livelihood for local communities, which emphasizes the needs of their economy on agriculture. The varieties of agricultural production are *shitake* (mushroom), *wasabi* leaves, soy bean, *kisinekuri* (a type of chesnut), peach fruits, cucumbers, tomatos and etc. After processing the agricultural production acquires higher value products. For example, soy bean will be processed into *miso* (Japanese fermented soup) and rice is also processed into rice cakes of *mochi* and other processed products.

The socio-cultural potential involves the diverse culture that is basically related to the main livelihood of farming communities. Farming is reflected in culture through such activities

as rice planting festival, traditional industry and art, historical and cultural activities such as Kagura dance (a form of dance or music dedicated to Shinto God), Taiko musical (percussion) instruments that are used into Japanese classical musical and activities of meditation. The activities in rural areas through tourism at Yamashiro District encompasses of agricultural experience, such as planting, harvesting with local farmers, farm tours, trekking (from Iwakuni to Yamashiro District), and other tourist activities in a rural setting. These types of activities support a diversified, forceful agriculture and forestry sector and provide economic opportunities that are the first steps in revitalizing marginalized rural communities.

Figure 1 explains the relation between tourism and NPO "Hot Nishiki". The role of NPO *Hot Nishiki* can be formulated as follows: it created the tourist program, promoting and empowering local communities; it explores the potential local nature and culture as resources for a tourism program. By those activities, there will be an empowerment of local community, conservation and revitalization of the local natural and socio cultural potential.

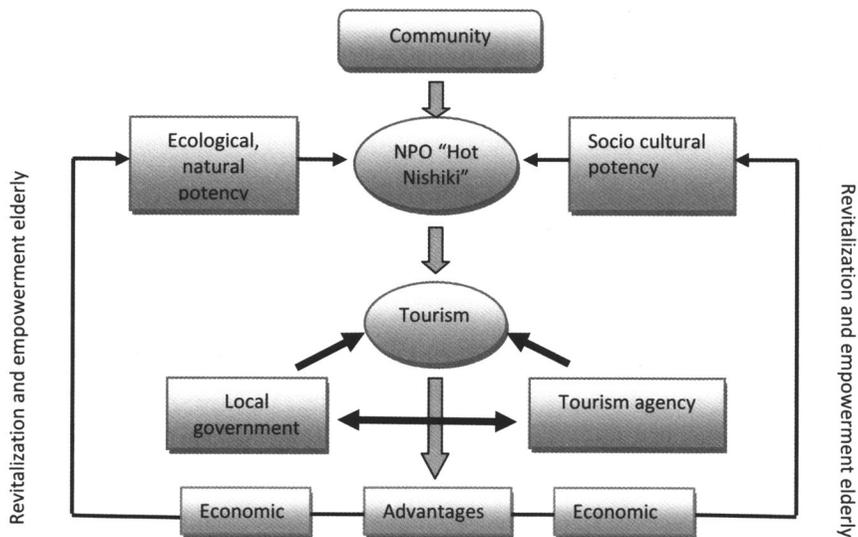


Figure 1. Relationship of NPO and Tourism for local community's revitalization at Yamashiro District

Source: own research

## II. Case Study: The NPO "Hot Nishiki" at Yamashiro District

### Introduction

In this part the work of "Hot Nishiki" local organization, involved in local revitalization through tourism is examined. The tourism activities that are currently running at Yamashiro District include student excursion programs that are offered, farm stay at local people's houses, as well as other activities, included in activities in farms and the Furusato festival.

Yamashiro District is a part of Yamaguchi Prefecture. More precisely it is located in the Iwakuni area. The total population in Yamaguchi Prefecture in 2010 was approximately 1,451,000 across 6,114 km<sup>2</sup>, while the population in *Chusankan Chiiki* areas was 367,000 spread across 4,220 km<sup>2</sup> (Yamaguchi Ken, 2011). Iwakuni was divided into an urban area (old Iwakuni on the coastal side) and rural areas (including Yamashiro District, which was the former Nishiki Town, Hongou Village, Mikawa Town and Miwa Town). Historically, the region north of Iwakuni-shi is called "Yamashiro". It occupies about half of Iwakuni-shi (city). It is located at the southwest end of Nishichugoku-mountains, and the Seto Inland Sea side. It is adjacent in Hiroshima and Shimane prefectures. The Nishiki River, clear and beautiful river, that is the longest in Yamaguchi, flows through this area. Upstream, there is the beautiful sightseeing spot of "Jakuchikyo". Downstream, there is the famous Kintai-kyo Bridge. Besides, the Oze River that runs through the prefectural border between Yamaguchi and Hiroshima adds up to the water resources of this region. At the riverside of Oze, there are the superb "Yasakakyo" or Rakan-Vally views. The Yamashiro region has relatively warm climate.

The accessibility to reach Yamashiro District is good being connected through Sanyo Expressway, Chugoku Expressway and the Sanyo Shinkansen (bullet train). From there Miya-jima island (world heritage sites) and Hiroshima are easily access. There are many interesting and beautiful places in Yamashiro. There are archeological sites where remains from Jomon and the Yayoi periods were excavated. A lot of historical spots relating to the revolution by Heike legend exist; the "Sengoku-jidai" or Meiji Restoration is also of great interest. Agriculture is a major industry at Yamashiro, however demographic change also has influence on the importance of agriculture.

### **NPO contributes to the development of rural tourism for local revitalization**

*Hot Nishiki* NPO at Yamashiro, Nishiki cho area as the old Nishiki town, Yamashiro District was established on March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2006 to begin a new effort to find ways of revitalizing the local community through activities organized to help and support local life. Since its establishment it has 50 members. Some of the prefectural governments and municipal authorities established research and support organization related to rural activities concerning rural tourism. For NPOs, tourism is not just an 'industry' or activity undertaken for a 'holiday' away from home - instead they look to practice a form of tourism with the intention of affecting new and positive attitudes, values and actions in the tourist and the host community.

Organization by local community is important to ensure local control over development planning and implementation. Prideaux (2002) states some factors that affect the success of attractions in peripheral areas: location factors, community support, operating economies and management of the attraction, and supporting tourism infrastructure in the surrounding areas. While this may seem difficult, however support especially from the local community can make the industry viable. Thus *Hot Nishiki* is a local organization, cooperating with the local

government and local people in the effort for rural revitalization of local areas. Its major contribution is the implementation of a student excursion program and helping in the organization of *Furusato* (home-place) festival. It is expected that through this activities urban people can be attracted to visit and enjoy rural areas. Figure 2 shows the area of work of Hot Nishiki. The headquarters of Yamashiro Shoukougai is in Mikawa but it is also supporting local tourism in Nishiki and Miwa.

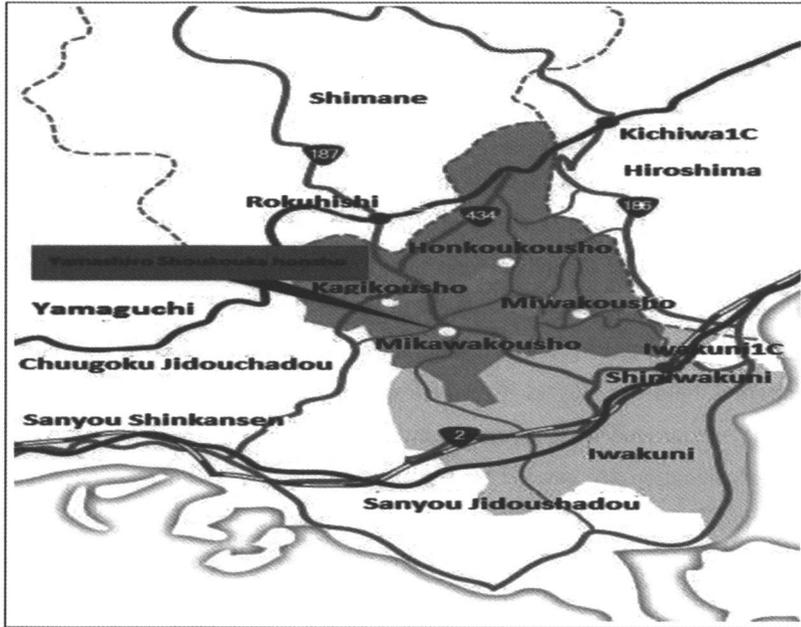


Figure 2. Map of commision of commerce & industry at Yamashiro District

Source: <http://e-yamashiro.com/category/profile>

### Farm Stay program

Urban students visit rural areas and are introduced to rural experiences. This brings various benefits, such as contribution to revitalization of local economy, as well as helps the conservation of rural areas. Rural tourism at Yamashiro District is offering farm stays program as agricultural experiences for urban students. The farm stays program at Yamashiro District includes accommodation with rural activities that are arranged by local communities. Student excursion is a seasonal program held by *Hot Nishiki* and local government aiming to attract urban students to visit Yamashiro District. The programs are well managed by Yamashiro Prefectural branch office and "Hot Nishiki". An important point is that it is a Nonprofit Organization (NPO) by local people and for local people, which has aims in supporting and developing the Nishiki region (Yamashiro).

Urban school excursions to rural areas contribute to the local economy and help students to understand the rural way of life. There are eighty one farms offering stays, owned by local

communities and lying scattered around the Yamashiro District. The number of student excursions in Yamashiro District is increasing. From 2008 to 2010 there was only one-time visit annually. In 2011 excursions increased four times with a total number of 263 students. The situation changed in 2012, but although the visits were only three times, the total number of visitors slightly increased to 322 students. The activities offered include: experiencing agricultural work, fishing, cooking, trying authentic local foods, and learning to make local crafts. Furthermore the student excursion programs are expected to increase the interaction between urban and rural communities (Wijaya, 2013).

### **Furusato festival**

Tourism development in Japan can be characterized as a contradiction between the goals to open Japan more and internationalize with the fear about the loss of Japanese cultural tradition (Creighton, 1997). The *furusato* idea is nothing new in the research of the local Japanese tourism industry, where this appeal to seek the *furusato* is exploited in the domestic tourism industry in Japan (Creighton, 1997). This *furusato* idea is used in the philosophy of *Furusato* festival. Festivals are often used by destination to attract tourists (Getz, 2008).

This festival is held annually in November at Nishiko-cho Yamashiro District. Nishiki Furusato festival is encouraged by local communities and sponsored by Iwakuni city. The festival structure and organization are carried out by *Hot Nishiki*. This event engages also local people in rural areas. The preparation requires good cooperation between *Hot Nishiki*, the local government and rural communities. A meeting is arranged three days before the due date between the *Hot Nishiki* leader and staffs of the Yamashiro office branch. The festival has major impact on the development of cultural tourism, so important to the host communities. The festival organizers use historical and cultural themes to develop annual events attracting visitors and creating cultural image in the host cities involving community support. These events provide numerous benefits for the communities in rural areas. They attract people to come "home" – that is the meaning of *furusato*. They are also appealing to visitors from urban areas with the chance to see traditional Japan. Thus the expected goal of local revitalization is realized: involving the local communities and empowering the elderly people.

Integration of stakeholders in tourism is an important aspect of sustainability. There are three components of the local rural community involvement that plays an important role for the rural tourism development at Yamashiro District, namely: 1. Private organization/NPO "Hot nishiki, 2. Local government and 3. Farmers. It is an NPO for the local community by local community aimed at community development, operates tourist attractions. The local government has a function as a facilitator and making policy. Farmers make the main center, offering not only accommodation for student excursions, but also provide interesting experience in farming activities. In addition for the integration multi stakeholder's participation is also needed. They include the national government, schools, tour operators, the private business sector and local

authorities. There is mutual coordination of tourism activity management at Yamashiro District. The coordination is undertaken by the Yamaguchi Prefecture and the local Government of Iwakuni City. In addition, these activities are supported by Private organizations, such as: Research association of Hiroshima Bay Urban area, Association of Domestic tourism, Domestic Commerce and Industry Association, Domestic Cooperation of Forestry, and Domestic Cooperation of Agriculture, etc. Figure 3 describes the integration of multi stakeholders. Each element of community has a major contribution in the implementation of student excursion programs. The local government has a role in planning and coordination; in addition it provides a multi-lateral coordination with home stay organizations (Min-Paku) and "Hot Nishiki". Both the local private sector and local government provide support in funding. The integration of these local organizations helps to utilize local resources and thus revitalization and sustainability of rural tourism development.

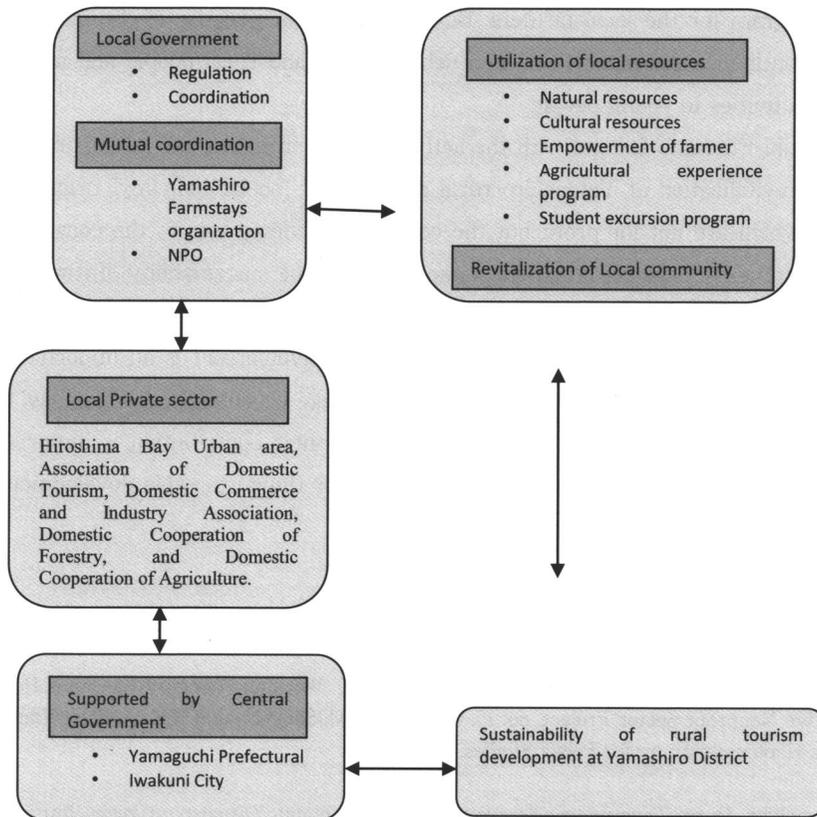


Figure 3 the integration of stakeholders for sustainability of rural tourism at Yamashiro District.

Source: own research

## Conclusion

This paper has explained the contribution of NPO *Hot Nishiki* for local revitalization, to promote regional activities and to support the lives of residents. The “Student excursion program” and “Furusato” festival, managed by Hot Nishiki have been successful in attracting a lot of visitors and engaging a lot of people from the local communities. Though increase of elderly people is a main problem in rural areas, it could not be an obstacle since the elderly may be empowered to conduct local revitalization as the example at Yamashiro District.

According to its next program for autumn 2014 Hot Nishiki is preparing a student excursion program that will be implemented on October. Unfortunately, the program did not exist in 2013. Hot Nishiki does not have a fixed number of members, because most of them work as volunteers, managed by former government officials who retired early. Based on interviews with key informants we find, that there are no significant benefits received from the student excursion program for the local farmers. But the important purpose of “Student excursions” program is continuous interaction between urban people and rural people and introduction of agricultural activities to young people.

The Nishiki Furusato festival with the active local involvement has its important contribution to local revitalization at Yamashiro rural district. For “social economy” organizations, the activities of which are not for profit but the contribution views lead to the consideration that support of varieties of local communities is necessary for the sustainability of rural areas in Japan especially for local revitalization in rural areas.

The Nishiki Furusato festival with the active local involvement is an important contribution to local revitalization at Yamashiro’s rural. For “socio- economic” organizations, the activities they support and organize are not for profit, but their contribution is important. Their support to varieties of local communities is necessary for the sustainable development of rural areas in Japan especially for their revitalization.

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