

Contemporary Problems in Japan's Rural Areas and Opportunities for Developing Rural Tourism: A Case of Yamashiro District in Yamaguchi Prefecture

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(Abstract)

At present there are significant challenges in developing tourism in rural areas related to degradation problems. The challenging are common problems such as decline in the economic infrastructure, aging society and depopulation. Despite this, there are hopes for the potential of Yamashiro District, which faces similar problems in developing rural tourism. Rural tourism was first positioned as an important measure to realize positive changes in depopulated farm villages with the initiative of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF), Japan. Utilization of resources at Yamashiro District through tourism is expected to provide benefits solving the problems exist this benefits include, accommodating the needs of tourists to be close with nature, creating awareness of the environment, appreciation of local culture, fostering good interaction between local communities and tourist , empowerment of local communities. The agricultural experiences along with farmer enthusiasm are used to attract visitors. It is becoming of value to developing tourism as a form of rural diversification. The purpose of this study is the identification of problems and exploring the potential of tourism in order to be successful in the rural tourism industry. For identification of rural tourism, SWOT analysis is used. This method is used to explain internal factors assessment (strengths and weaknesses), and externals factors assessment (opportunities and threats). This analysis will be useful in designing the recommendations for rural tourism that can be appropriately applied at Yamashiro District. According to the study, it is suggested that developing the potential in rural areas should be adjusted by balancing carrying capacity and local culture, thereby ensuring that the quality of environment and socio-cultural dimensions can be maintained and preserved.

Keywords: Tourism, Rural Tourism, Agriculture, Community Involvement, conservation, revitalization

1. Introduction

The contribution of the tourism industry to the overall Japanese economy is equal to the leading and typical industries such as automobile and electric machinery. The share of tourism industry in total GDP was 2.2% in 2000, whereas the automobile industry was 2.3%, telecommunication 2.0%, electricity 1.9%, and agriculture 1.5% respectively. The travel demand in Japan has been declining for more than four years due to the persistent economic recession, but it can be said that the sluggish demand is partly attributed to the degradation of tourist destina-

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tions and travel products in Japan. The underlying issue is “the inability to manage resources and the tourist destinations in an integrated format. There is a clear need for tourist destinations to be managed in sustainable ways, not only preventing degradation of tourism resources but also enhancing their value, and creating a system or structure that satisfies the needs and demands of both residents and tourists” (*OECD,2002*).

MAFF cited by Arahi found to fulfill the changing of demand on tourism there are various tourism activities that offered. While over three quarters of the total land area in Japan is devoted to agriculture and forestry nevertheless motivation of tourists to visit agricultural areas is lacking. Therefore the initiatives of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) of Japan is support the use of rural areas for tourism and attract the urban people to visit rural areas. It is expected can be solves the problem that faces in rural areas.

Due to the centralization of economic activity in Tokyo, depopulation and the loss of industry have been serious problems in rural towns and villages in Japan since the 1960s. Depopulation and aging have been a problem for some time in many rural communities, leading to a serious lack of leaders or volunteers to establish new businesses. Several comprehensive National Development Plans have been implemented by the Japanese government to fight rural depopulation. However they have not been effective. As an alternative solution, the Japanese government is looking at the importance of urban-rural exchange. One typical example is rural tourism in depopulating areas (Asamizu, 2012). According to Odagiri “The arranging opportunities for participation become a strategy to resolve the local problems. They may discuss local problems at the meeting. However, young people and women are often excluded as a matter of practice because of the "one vote per household" system”. For the development of rural areas, agriculture and local communities (society) must be the first priority to develop. Rural tourism related activities have been widely regarded as key-tools for rural development. “Rural” experience program has been provided and farm stay as a core feature of rural tourism at Yamashiro. Through these activities, students from urban areas visit Yamashiro District and lives in farm families for a few days, and engage in daily activities in the village. However, the existing development of these tourism activities at Yamashiro District is still immature. It is means the attractions for visitors at Yamashiro are limited in term of student excursion programs which are managed entirely by Prefectural office (Yamashiro prefectural branch). It shows difficult for individual tourists or conventional tourists to involve and have the same experiences in daily rural life.

Rural tourism is a form of alternative tourism which is concern for the physical environment that typifies green tourism, to include economic, social and cultural considerations. “Thus alternative tourism can be viewed as being synonymous with the concept of sustainable tourism development” (Holden, 2000). Sustainable tourism therefore seeks to sustain the quantity, quality and productivity of both human and natural resource systems over time, while respecting and accommodating the dynamics of such systems (Reid, 1991). Sustainable tourism is de-

veloped and managed together with the principles of sustainable development (Hunter1995). These principles of sustainable development are based on the theory of carrying capacity (Butler et al, 1998). Carrying Capacity is defined as “The maximum number of people that may visit a tourist destination at the same time, without causing destruction of the physical, economic, socio-cultural environment and an unacceptable decrease in the quality of visitors' satisfaction” (WTO). Based on the concept carrying capacity, Yamashiro District must be conscious for the ability of local community, economy and culture to support the needs and tourist activities at destination.

Therefore, the opportunities to develop rural tourism are required an identification of problems, issues and potential resources at Yamashiro District. This paper aims to identify the problems of rural at Yamashiro District using SWOT analysis and to create the model of rural tourism based on local community.

2. Rural areas in Japan

Approximately 78 % of the total land area in Japan is devoted to agriculture and forestry (12 % and 66 % respectively), and 70 % of total water use is concentrated on agricultural activities. Definitions of ‘rural’ vary both in scale and philosophy (Robert et al, 2003). According to the “Classification of Agricultural Area” by MAFF (Ministry of Agriculture, Forest and Fishery) statistics, “rural areas” refer to areas which are not “urban areas”. A rural community is where most of its population is in some way involved in the primary sector and the areas which consist of rural communities are called ‘rural areas’.¹

Japanese agriculture is characterized by the following elements: i) the majority of farm households are scattered throughout the country; ii) farms are generally small and fragmented due to both topographical constraints and the land reforms implemented after World War II; iii) aging farmers and depopulation of rural communities, and iv) the majority of farmers have a second non-farm business from which 90% of their income is derived (OECD). Rural areas are also called *Chusankan Chiiki* in Japanese, a term that includes agriculture and forest areas. Most *Chusankan Chiiki* areas are facing depopulation and aging issues (Asamizu, 2012). Depopulation especially hits the younger generation and has resulted in the closure of elementary and junior high schools in *Chusankan Chiiki* in Yamaguchi Prefecture (Yamaguchi Ken:2011a:22).

3. Rural Problems

At Yamashiro District, there are complicated problems in rural areas at present. The main problems can be classified into two aspects: population (an aging society) and land.

3.1 Problems of Population and land

3.1.1 Population

Depopulation progressed significantly during the high economic growth in the 1960s. The word “depopulation”- *Kaso* in Japanese appeared first in a government document in 1966, and the first law seeking to counteract depopulation was enacted in 1979.

Japan's total population in 2011 was 127.80 million. This ranked tenth in the world and made up 1.8 percent of the world's total. Japan's population density measured 343 persons per square kilometer in 2010, ranking seventh among countries with a population of 10 million or more. On the other hand, in 2011, the child population in Japan (0-14 years) amounted to 16.17 million, accounting for 13.1 percent of the total population, the lowest level on record since the survey began. The production-age population (15-64 years) totaled 81.34 million. In share term, it accounted for 63.7 percent of the entire population, continuing its decline since 1993. As a result, the ratio of the dependent population (the sum of ages and child population divided by the production-age population) was 57.1 percent. In term of their proportion of the total population, the aged have surpassed the child group since 1997.ⁱ

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).

3.1.2 Land

The degradation of land utilization for farming and forestry has also been progressing at a remarkable rate, especially since the mid 1980s. It resulted in the abandonment of cultivation and ruined forestry land, due to the shortage of labor in agriculture and forestry. The degradation of land has coincided with the process of population decline through natural decrease. In the earlier period of rapid social decrease of population, in many cases the older generations had chosen to stay in their places of origin and continued in farming and forestry. The labor shortage did not become immediately evident at that time, owing to new labor saving processes using mechanization and chemicals and also due to the improved health and longevity of the parent generations. However, the labor shortage has become a real issue now that the older

generations have retired and population decrease is largely due to natural decrease (Odagiri).

As a result, farming has rapidly been abandoned, especially in hilly and mountainous areas; thus, the problems of such areas have been brought up for discussion in the national political arena. The term "hilly and mountainous areas" has been previously used in academic circles in discussing specific regions since the 1960. The public administration, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fishery (MAFF) in 1988 defined them as "areas with insufficient flat farmlands", and included in this both areas on the periphery of the plains and in the mountains.

3.2 The Emergence of Rural Policy

Historically, Japanese agricultural policy had been developed under the Basic Law on Agriculture (1961-1999), the main target of which was "to equalize differences in productivity and income between agriculture and other industries". National and local governments have been trying to introduce other industries into the rural economy for rural income diversification since 1970s, but the results to date have been limited. Reflecting these circumstances, the new targeted areas of Japanese policy on farm household income diversification is "on-farm" or "off-farm, but local-specific" pluriactivity which is deeply related to farming or rural traditions, such as direct sales with practical experiences, green tourism with farmhouse accommodation and foods, and participatory activities in farming and harvesting.

In recent years, the rural development policy "Complementarities and Interrelationships between Urban and Rural Areas" has been vigorously promoted by both the public and private sectors. The objectives of this policy can be summarized as follows:

1. Urban residents feel an increasing need to integrate rural amenities in their lifestyle.
 - Residents in urban areas have their own image of agriculture and rural community life. They would like to find comfort, relaxation, safety, as well as fresh and high quality agricultural products in the countryside.
 - Most Japanese believe that children should learn about agriculture and rural life to promote understanding of the importance of nature and food.
2. There is an increasing need for other gainful activities by farm households in order to maintain the demographic and social structure of rural communities.
 - Aging and depopulation have continued, and in some cases the population rate of certain communities is at a critical stage. The concern of losing the benefits of rural amenities has provoked policy demand for rural revitalization.
3. There is a demand to move away from policy measures that encourage higher levels of resource and input use to measures that aim at environmental and rural amenities preservation (OECD).

Within this law, rural policy measures promoting of tourism activity in rural are clearly stipulated.

4. Opportunities for Developing Rural Tourism at Yamashiro District

The opportunities of rural tourism development are exploring the resource potential for a diversification of rural activities through tourism at Yamashiro District.

4.1 Rural Tourism

The World Tourism Organization (WTO) defines rural tourism as the tourism product "that gives to visitors a personalized contact, a taste of physical and human environment of countryside and as far as possible, allow them to participate in the activities, traditions and lifestyles of local people." Rural can include participating in a wide range of activities like: climbing, riding, adventure tourism, educational travel, sport and health tourism, arts and heritage tourism. Oppermann (1997) saw rural tourism as tourism that occurs in nonurban settings where human activity is present (Beeton, 2006). Negrusa et al (2007) defines rural tourism as that form of tourism offered by people from rural areas, with accommodation on small-scale and with the implication of important components of their rural activities and customs of life. Tourism it appears to be developing an elitist bias as broadening of its social base with participation from all sections of the society is clearly not visible.

Rural tourism involves relatively new tourist attractions that are conducted by farmer. In Japan rural tourism is one way to solve the problems due to depopulation and aging society in rural area. Prideaux (2002) "identifies the transformation of the twentieth century where country-side rural dwellers have migrated to urban populations in search for employment and services which are not attainable in rural areas". As a result, these communities searched for other alternatives to help revitalize their rural economy.

Green tourism in Japan is currently a new form of tourist attraction in rural area and has been adopted by European experiences.ⁱⁱⁱ Although largely inspired by the concepts developed in Europe, green tourism practices in Japan show several aspects which are particular to Japan. Green tourism was first positioned as an important measure to realize positive changes in depopulated farm villages with the initiative of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries. Green tourism began to be dealt with as a vital tourism measure by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, and Transport. "As the importance of tourism becomes greater to the Japanese economy, green tourism is expected to generate various benefits such as economic revitalization and interaction between urban and rural communities" (Mitani). Lane (1994) "points out that in addition to the fact that rurality is the central feature of rural tourism; green tourism entails small scaled, individually owned tourism facilities and interactions between visitors and the population of the host communities".

According to Ohe (2003), the technical terms of Japanese rural tourism are as follows:

- **Farm tourism:** Activities run by farm households or farm enterprises.
- **Agri tourism:** Farm-tourism plus activities run by farmers' cooperatives or other farm-

ers' organizations.

- **Green tourism:** Agri-tourism plus activities run by municipalities or the third sector (Municipalities often become main organizers of local festivals and events).
- **Rural tourism:** Green-tourism plus activities run by non-farm sector or rural inhabitants in general.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries has stated that rural areas should be defined, not only as the basis of agriculture and the place where rural people live, but also as “*national public property where people can relax and cultivate a calm and harmonious state of mind*” (The Association for Green Tourism, established by the MAFF 1993).

4.2 Profile Yamashiro District in Iwakuni City, Yamaguchi Prefecture.

Yamaguchi Prefecture is located at the far western end of Honshu Island. The *Shinkansen* high-speed railway and major highways that connect Honshu and Kyushu Island all run through Yamaguchi Prefecture. Yamaguchi Prefecture's south coast is an urbanized area that includes Shimonoseki City, Yamaguchi City, Ube City, Shunan City and other urban centers. Meanwhile, the island areas and some parts of the north coast of Yamaguchi Prefecture are primarily rural. The total population in Yamaguchi Prefecture in 2010 was approximately 1,451,000 across 6,114 km², while the population in *Chusankan Chiiki* areas was 367,000 spread across 4,220 km² (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). The physical geography of Yamashiro District consists of 90 percent forest with a mountain. Yamashiro District populations have declined due to depopulation, falling birth rates and aging people. The problems of population at Yamashiro from the data in 2005 the total population was 11,523. It has declined to 10,056 in 2010 (Iwakuni city, 2011). The main reasons of depopulation rural labor are searching employment and better education facilities in urban areas. Population changes result in decrease labor force which influences the economic growth at Yamashiro District.

Agriculture is a major industry at Yamashiro, however demographic change also influence on the importance of agriculture. The development of rural tourism at Yamashiro District is a form of interaction between tourist and local communities. 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.”



Figure 1. Yamaguchi Map

4.3 Identification Rural Tourism Potential at Yamashiro District

Tourism resources at Yamashiro District could be classified into the potential of ecological and potential of socio-cultural. The ecological resources are the natural and agricultural. These have potential to develop as tourist attraction, which create all of the forms of nature and agriculture as the main object. Agriculture is the main livelihood for local communities, which emphasis the needs of their economy on agriculture. The varieties of agricultural production are *shitake*, *wasabi* leaf, soy bean, *kisinekuri*, peach fruit, cucumbers, tomato and etc. Afterward the agricultural products would become higher value products such as soy bean will be processed into a *miso* (Japanese fermented soup) and rice is also processed into rice cakes of *mochi* and other processed products.

Socio-cultural potential involves the diverse culture that is basically related to the main livelihood of farming communities. Farming can be a reflection of 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 tourists activities in a rural setting. Rural tourism activities established an NPO (Non Profit Organization) called "Hot Nishiki" in 2006. This organization, along with a related Yamashiro Experience and Exchange Council, operates tourist attractions that include canoeing, fishing, and local cooking.

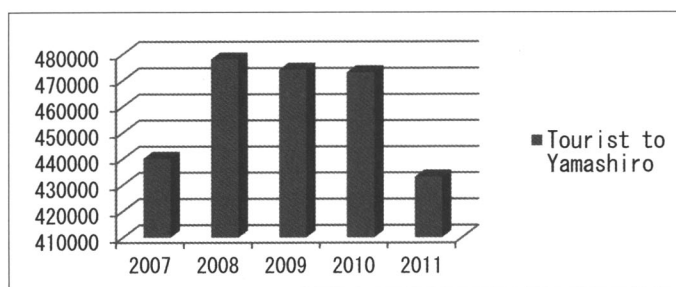


Table 1 The Number of Tourist to Yamashiro
Source: Iwakuni City (2011)

4.4 Tourism Activities at Yamashiro

There is student excursion as annual programs to attract visitors come to Yamashiro District. The student excursion programs are well managed by Yamashiro Prefectural branch office and “Hot nishiki”. It is a Non Profit Organization (NPO) that is managed by local people which has aims in supporting and developing the Nishiki region (Yamashiro). Urban school excursion to rural area contributes to the local economy and help student understand the rural way of life. Form of tourism at Yamashiro District is provided farm stays programs with agricultural experiences. It is an accommodation included with rural experiences that are arranged by local communities. There are eighty one farm stays owned by local communities and lying scattered around the Yamashiro District. Table 2 show the number of students excursion at Yamashiro District in 2008 to the year 2010 only once time visited each year. In 2011 has accepted fourth times with total number are 263 students. It is has changed in 2012, although the acceptance of visits only third times however the total number are slightly increase to 322 students. The activities offered are; experiencing agricultural work, fishing, cooking, trying authentic local foods, and learning to make local crafts. Furthermore the student excursion programs are expected the interaction between urban and rural communities. Here is following the complete data regarding of students excursion to Yamashiro District.

| No | Year | Schedules | Numbers of Students | The Numbers of Homestay |
|----|------|--------------|---------------------|-------------------------|
| 1 | 2008 | 8/25 - 8/29 | 107 | 28 |
| 2 | 2009 | 8/24 - 8/28 | 24 | 8 |
| 3 | 2010 | 10/2 - 10/11 | 13 | 4 |
| 4 | 2011 | 5/19 - 5/20 | 136 | 43 |
| 5 | | 7/26 - 7/29 | 61 | 20 |
| 6 | | 9/2 - 9/4 | 28 | 8 |
| 7 | | 9/7 - 9/9 | 38 | Stayed at hotel |
| 8 | 2012 | 5/16 - 5/17 | 24 | Stayed at hotel |
| 9 | | 8/28 - 8/30 | 18 | 6 |
| 10 | | 10/30-11/1 | 280 | 81 |

Table 2 Student excursion at Yamashiro District
Source: Prefectural Yamaguchi, 2011

The mutual coordination of tourism activities management at Yamashiro District is undertaken by Government of Yamaguchi Prefecture and local Government of Iwakuni City. These activities in addition supported by private sector organizations as follow: 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. The figure describes the coordination all of the stakeholders which consist of local communities, tourists and government. The integration of all stakeholders is expected to involve the local communities to create diverse of income and opportunities for local economic growth and role of government provide the economic support, conserve environment and socio cultural resources for the sustainability of rural tourism activities at Yamashiro District.

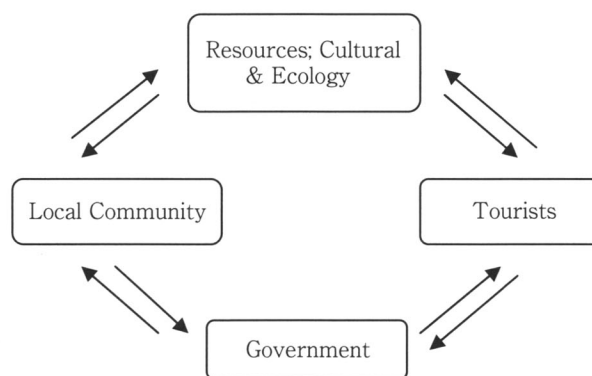


Figure 2 The integration of Rural Tourism Development at Yamashiro District

At Yamashiro District, the livelihoods most of the societies are farmers, included trend of tourism on natural attractiveness of rural activities. It is an opportunity to improve the economic life, by empowering local communities through tourism. When the local communities (farmers) as the main of actors in rural are categorized elderly people, at the same time as the younger generation was not interested in living in the village who will manage the village that has the potential to develop into tourist activities. It would require a conceptual framework or model as abstractions for the sustainability of rural tourism based on community at Yamashiro District.

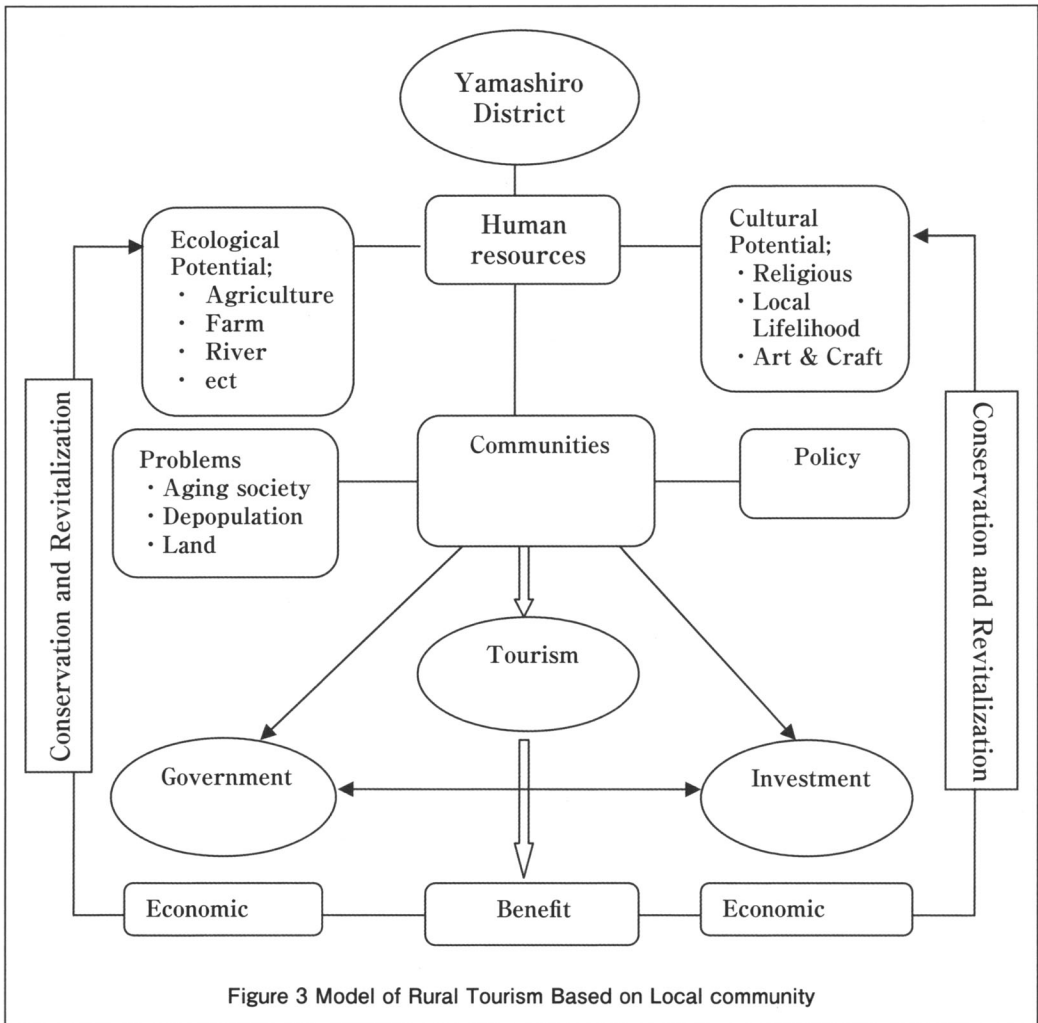


Figure 3 Model of Rural Tourism Based on Local community

Figure 3 illustrates that a model of rural tourism based on local community describes existing resources at Yamashiro District including ecology potential, human resources, and socio-cultural potential. Rural tourism as a tool of rural development, therefore the agriculture and society must be first priority to develop. However as a rural area it has some problems related to population issues and policies that are less organized. To solve the problems, local communities have a central role in collaboration with private investment and government as a facilitator, expected to formulate policies and diversified agricultural activities associated with tourism. The integration between the stakeholders resulted in benefits improving the rural economic, revitalization and conservation in ecological and socio-cultural resources at Yamashiro District.

5. Identification rural tourism potential used SWOT analysis

To assess the internal and external factors affecting the development process of target villages for tourism, first the index of these factors must be determined. Most important factors include environmental, tourism, economic, social-cultural. Strengths and weaknesses (internal factors) and opportunities and threats (external factors) are listed in table 3.

| Factors | Internal Factors | | External Factors | |
|----------------------|---|---|---|---|
| | <i>Strengths (S)</i> | <i>Weaknesses (W)</i> | <i>Opportunities (O)</i> | <i>Threats (T)</i> |
| Environment | 1. Soil fertility 2. Various of plant 3. River (Nishiki) 4. Landscape | Weather changing | Conservation | 1. Land change 2. Degradation of environment |
| Tourism | 1. Farm stay 2. Local foods 3. Specialize visitor (Urban student excursion) | 1. Lack of government funds 2. Lack of promotion 3. Lack of visitor's motivation to rural 4. Accessibility | 1. Job creation 2. Create a new rural tourism packages | Competitiveness with other destination |
| Economic | Livelihood relying on agricultural activities | 1. Lack of Income 2. Lack of prosperity of agricultural activities 3. Lack of agricultural employment | Economic diversification | Increasing of labor migration |
| Socio-culture | 1. Local culture 2. art and local crafts 3. Local knowledge | 1. Aging population 2. Depopulation 3. Lack of local organization | 1. Aging but active population 2. Culture conservation 3. Culture/ community revitalization | Changing of local culture |

Table 3 Internal and External factors on rural development process for tourism SWOT analysis

Conclusion and Recommendation

1. This paper has highlighted some of the challenges in developing rural tourism by identifying the problems facing in population and explore the rural resources that potential for tourist attraction as an alternative source of income, conserving the environment and revitalization of local culture.
2. The student excursion program aimed to attract youth urban to visiting rural areas. This urban- rural exchange draws urban people temporarily and expected could be introduce rural potential in urban areas.
3. Japanese government as a core policy maker emphasis in policy should be placed more the

promotion of rural tourism. Local communities should be involved as a decision maker in the planning process to ensure all community voices are heard.

4. The involvement of local communities is providing of opportunities in the development process to achieving the sustainability, as well to determine the readiness of communities for rural tourism. Future research needs market information to determine the demand for rural tourism. Analysis of demand illustrated by participation rate and experiences of 'rural tourist' within rural tourism and conducted through questionnaire.

ⁱ OECD. The Role of Agriculture and Farm Household Diversification In The Rural Economy of Japan. This report reviews information on the role of agriculture and farm household diversification in the rural economy of Japan. It was prepared by Toru Kumagai of the OECD Secretariat.

ⁱⁱ Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication (MIC). The writer searched on website of Statistics Bureau, Director General for Policy Planning and Statistical Research and Training Institute.

ⁱⁱⁱ Shoko Mitani. "Green Tourism, environmentally sound rural tourism in Japan: Recommendations for improvement of Japanese green tourism practices". Expressions of rural tourism are used as synonym to green tourism, farm tourism, and agriculture tourism.

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