

Rural Tourism for Local Revitalization in Yamaguchi Prefecture

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Abstract

This paper examines tourist connections between urban and rural areas in Japan with a special focus on Yamaguchi Prefecture. Yamaguchi Prefecture has many natural and historical tourist destinations that appeal to the domestic tourist market. Unfortunately, mountainous agricultural areas in Yamaguchi Prefecture which are far from urban areas have been suffering from depopulation and aging. For rural revitalization, some of the rural communities in Yamaguchi are trying to initiate new types of tourism which target urban residents.

Keywords: depopulation, rural revitalization, rural tourism

Introduction

For more than half a century, rural depopulation has been a serious problem in Japan. To mitigate rural depopulation, the Japanese government established the Comprehensive National Development Plans (*Zenkoku Sougou Kaihatsu Keikaku*) in 1962. In an effort to combat rural depopulation, the creation of employment opportunities has been important. Some of the prefectural governments also initiated unique plans to mitigate depopulation. For example, the One Village One Product movement started from Oita Prefecture and contributed to the production of unique, special-

ty products representative of each village that have also become souvenirs for tourists.

At the same time, the rural way of life is becoming attractive among the urban residents. Television programs on travel also regularly feature rural destinations, and some of these rural destinations have become remarkably successful in attracting urban tourists. Despite the fact that many of the farm stay ventures started for some supplemental income in remote areas, a number of the farmers have already succeeded in growing the businesses commercially as green tourism enterprises beyond initial expectations.

Definitions of Green Tourism are different from country to country. In Japan, as legal and financial support by the MAFF (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fishery) is strong, Green tourism in Japan is known as rural tourism which focuses on urban-rural exchanges. For example, the Green Tourism Law supported by MAFF was enacted in 1995 (passed in 1994) and the related organizations were established around this time. Nation-wide organizations such as the Organization for the Revitalization of Urban-Rural Interchange (*Machi-Mura Kouryu Kikou*), the Council for the Promotion of Interchange and Coexistence between Urban and Rural Communities (*Orai-Nippon*) are some notable examples.

1. Green Tourism in Japan: An Overview

Urban people traveled to rural destinations in Japan consistently in the past, before the Green Tourism Law came into effect in 1995. With respect to tourism in the twentieth century alone, Kurisu (2008) has divided urban-rural tourism in Japan into four eras: the beginning of urban-rural exchange (1970s), resort boom (the middle of 1980s to early 90s), beginning of Green Tourism Policies (1990s) and a new phase of Green Tourism (late 1990s) (Kurisu 2008: 30). In addition, there are important regional vari-

ations of Green Tourism, and implications are also different for different areas, and these are reflected in ongoing scholarly research. Wakabayashi (2013) has explored the importance of Tourism Public Corporation in Iida City, Nagano Prefecture. Iida City is one of the founders of Japan's Green Tourism and it has also succeeded in receiving a large number of school excursionists (Wakabayashi 2013: 168-169).

Park and Takahashi (2009) introduced the educational effect of such tourism from a case study of Kitakata City in Fukushima Prefecture which became a focal location for Mountain, Fisheries and Village Exchange Project for Children (the author has translated this as Urban-Rural Interchange Project for Children in this paper) by Japanese government (Park and Takahashi 2009: 331). Before the tsunami and nuclear disasters struck, Fukushima had rapidly emerged as a front-runner in Green Tourism activities, closely following popular spots such as Ajimu (Oita Prefecture), Tohno (Iwate Prefecture) and Iida (Nagano Prefecture). Kitakata and other municipalities in Fukushima successfully replicated green tourism initiatives from the above mentioned areas and became known as model cases for Japan's Green Tourism.

Nishimura et al (2003) examined the conservation of natural environment based on the interaction between human agents and nature in Green Tourism. Their main case study is the Shimanto River in Kochi Prefecture (Nishimura et al 2003: 39-42). The Shimanto River is a famous destination for nature-based tourists and recently, the rural lifestyle related to the river has also become an attraction for tourists.

Kitamura and Kayukawa (1999) researched the history of Green Tourism in Koromatsutani in Hokkaido. Forests are generally popular among nature-based tourists in Japan and as the case shows, forestry activities are also becoming important for rural revitalization and tourism develop-

ment (Kitamura and Kayukawa 1999: 118).

Based on the following discussions, we can observe that case studies on Green Tourism in Japan are a particularly rich field of research. A historical approach with literature review is also available. Kurisu (2011) chronicled many researchers from the research fields of rural areas, tourism and forest economics (Kurisu 2011: 37). Kurisu also suggests an important turn of the events during the early twenty-first century. According to Kurisu, some of the researchers in Japan were not sure whether Green Tourism in Japan would succeed as recently as in the 1990s. However, in 2000s, Green Tourism destinations provide strong evidence of both repeat tourists and new residents who formerly lived in urban areas. Beginning from the 2000s, tourist volunteers (voluntourism) who work with rural people are also playing an important role in the rural areas (Kuris 2011: 43-45).

2. Overview of Green Tourism Policies in Japan

Since the period of rapid economic development in the 1950 and 60s, urbanization and rural development have contributed to challenging concerns in Japan. Due to this rural depopulation, aging and the lack of a new work force, rural areas in Japan are most deeply affected. The Japanese government established the Comprehensive National Development Plans to mitigate rural development in 1962. However, this plan has not succeeded in its main goal of increasing inhabitants in the rural areas. For rural revitalization, some of the prefectural government initiated unique projects. For example, Oita Prefecture introduced the One Village One Product (OVOP) movement and some of the municipalities succeeded in creating unique commercial specialty products.

Meanwhile, the concept of a rural lifestyle is steadily becoming a “tourist attraction” among urban residents. Migration from rural areas to urban ar-

eas has continued for more than two generations now, and the rural way of life continues to be something new and attractive for urban residents. Some remote villages have also succeeded in drawing consistent benefits as “green tourism” destinations by packaging this rural way of life. The Japanese government has realized the importance of these phenomena, especially since the end of the bubble economy in the early 1990s.

Green tourism in Japan entered a new phase with the 5th Comprehensive National Development Plan of 1998. Until the 4th Comprehensive National Development Plan, mitigation of depopulation was targeted as a general goal. In the 5th Plan, rural revitalization with urban-rural interchange was added. Not only the MAFF, but also other national ministries and agencies are supporting various activities related to Green Tourism nowadays. For example, MEXT (the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) is supporting nature-based school excursions which include farm stays. The Ministry of the Environment (MoE) is exploring “forest therapy” with nature-based activities. These initiatives are in coordination with existing MAFF ventures.

As far as the local dimension is concerned, Green Tourism became important to earn some extra income for individual farmers during the 1990s. More recently, Green tourism has become important as community-based development strategies. For example, retired wealthy people, many of whom were once green tourists, relocated from urban to rural communities, thereby contributing to the rural community economically. Retired urban people are also credited for transferring the knowledge needed to create successful small businesses, including tourism and hospitality businesses.

It is not only retired people, but also younger human resources with appropriate skills that are also important for rural revitalization. The Min-

istry of Public Management, Home Affairs, Posts and Telecommunications (*Somu Sho*) has organized an initiative called *Chiiki-okoshi Kyouryoku-tai* (Supporters for Regional Revitalization). This allocates 4 million Yen for each supporter for up to 3 years (Table 1). As of 2012, 617 supporters, mainly from urban areas, are working under this project. The steady growth of this initiative is indicated in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Supporter for Regional Revitalization

| | Number of supporters | Total Supported organizations | Supported Prefectural organizations | Supported municipality's organizations |
|------|----------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|
| 2009 | 89 | 32 | 2 | 30 |
| 2010 | 257 | 90 | 2 | 88 |
| 2011 | 413 | 147 | 3 | 144 |
| 2012 | 617 | 207 | 3 | 204 |

Source: Somu Sho (2013) "Chiiki-okoshi Kyouryoku-tai". http://www.soumu.go.jp/main_sosiki/jichi_gyousei/c-gyousei/02gyosei08_03000066.html, accessed July 7, 2013

3. Rural Activities Related to Green Tourism

Japan has a small land area compared to larger countries of Asia, but the landscape of the archipelago has a rich varied terrain, divided by sea, mountains and river. This variety has resulted in various types of tourism in Japan. Agricultural villages offer farming experiences which are not familiar to urban residents. Farming itself has many varieties and differs from Hokkaido (far north) to Okinawa (far south). Upland river basins are an interesting landscape to understand the natural environment for nature-based tourists. Local fishing culture is different from river to river. Small islands have unique local nature and culture. Lifestyle in small islands attracts both nature-based and cultural tourists.

As mentioned in the previous section, rural revitalization is a serious

issue for managing rural areas. Some of the prefectural governments and municipal authorities have established research and/or support organizations related to rural activities. These organizations are also concerned with rural tourism development. The following table offers some examples of the Chugoku region (Table 2).

Table 2 Rural Research and/or Support Organizations in Chugoku Region

| |
|--|
| <p>Shimane-ken Chusankan Chiiki Kenkyu Center (Shimane Prefecture Mountainous Region Research Center) http://www.pref.shimane.lg.jp/chusankan/</p> |
| <p>Yamaguchi-ken Chusankan Chiiki Zukuri Support Center (Yamaguchi Prefecture Mountainous Region Revitalization Support Center) http://www.yamaguchi-pu.ac.jp/region/kouken/kokorosoudanin.html</p> |
| <p>Yamaguchi Slow Tourism Sougou Suishin Center (Yamaguchi Slow Tourism General Development Center) http://www.yamaguchi-slow.jp/</p> |
| <p>Hiroshima-ken Chusankan Machi Zukuri Kenkyujo (Hiroshima Prefecture Mountainous Region Revitalization Laboratory) http://www.pref.hiroshima.lg.jp/site/npo/1232342430265.html</p> |
| <p>Okayama-ken Chusankan Chiiki Kyoudou Shien Center (Okayama Prefecture Mountainous Region Co-working Support Center) http://blog.canpan.info/chusankan_oka/img/25/oka_chu_pf.pdf</p> |

Source: Made by author

In the cases of Hiroshima and Okayama, which contains large cities neighboring to rural areas, most active organizations are NPOs (Non Profit Organizations). However, in the case of Shimane, the main stakeholder is a prefectural organization which includes a research center, seminar house and accommodation facility. In the case of Yamaguchi Prefecture,

the prefectural government established “Yamaguchi-ken Chusankan Chiiki Zukuri Support Center” and “Yamaguchi Slow Tourism Sougou Suishin Center”. Compared to Shimane, Yamaguchi’s centers are relatively small. An interesting feature of Yamaguchi is the emerging networks between small NPOs.

Local administrative authorities are actively engaged in attracting school excursions from urban areas in general, throughout Japan. One of the main aims is the urban student, who will potentially become a repeat visitor in the future, and sustain the interaction process. Machi-Mura Kouryu Kikou also promotes Ueban-Rural Interchange Project for Children with farm Stay programs offered to urban kids (Table 3).

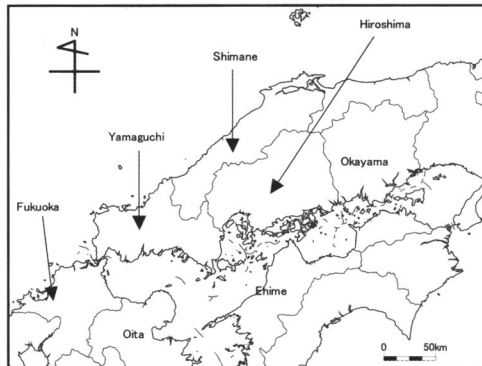
Table 3 Urban-Rural Interchange Project for Children

Source: Machi-Mura Kouryu Kikou (n.d.) *Kodomo Nousangyoson Kouryu Project*, Machi-Mura Kouryu Kikou

4. Case Study – Rural Revitalization Initiating Tourism and Leisure Activities in Yamaguchi Prefecture

Yamaguchi Prefecture is located in the far west of Honshu Island (Table 4). Some parts of Yamaguchi Prefecture are urbanized; however, many mountainous areas and small islands are suffering from depopulation. Like other rural prefecture, urban-rural interchange is becoming important.

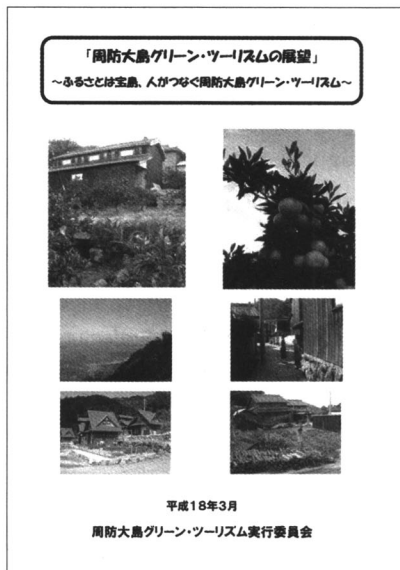
Table 4 Yamaguchi Prefecture



Source: Made by author

In Yamaguchi Prefecture, Suo Oshima became a model case of rural tourism development. By offering fishing and agricultural experiences, this island became successful in inviting school excursionists from Tokyo and Osaka (Table 5).

Table 5 Green Tourism in Suo Oshima



Source: Suo Oshima Green Tourism Jikkou Inkai (2003) *Suo Oshima Green Tourism no Tenbou*, Suo Oshima

As Yamaguchi Prefecture has 5 Shinkansen (High Speed Railway) stations, its public transportation system is relatively advanced. On the other hand, mountainous areas and small islands in Yamaguchi Prefecture have limited secondary transportation system. As school excursions use chartered busses from Shinkansen stations, this type of rural-oriented travel has become important in Yamaguchi Prefecture.

The Prefectural statistics indicate a steady rise in the number of schools that send their pupils to nature-oriented excursions during recent years. While as recent as in 2007, there was just only one school that sent its pupils for this type of travel, the number grew to 7 by 2008, and after a momentary decline in 2010; it has risen to 30 in 2012. Thus, in 5 years, there

is 30-fold increase in this sector in the prefecture. As far as the number of students coming to Yamaguchi as a part of rural excursions is concerned, 399 students took part in 2010, and the number jumped to 4591 in only 2 years (2012), indicating a sharp rise in the popularity of the prefecture as a rural destination (Table 6 and 7).

Table 6 Number of schools which send rural-oriented excursionists to Yamaguchi Prefecture

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|--|
| 2007 (1), 2008 (7), 2009 (8), 2010 (4), 2011 (28), 2012 (30) |
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Source: Yamaguchi Prefecture (2013) *Yamaguchi Slow Tourism Suishin Jigyo*, Yamaguchi Prefecture, Fact Sheet

Table 7 Number of students who visited Yamaguchi Prefecture by rural-oriented school excursions

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|--------------------------------------|
| 2010 (399), 2011 (3900), 2012 (4591) |
|--------------------------------------|

Source: Yamaguchi Prefecture (2013) *Yamaguchi Slow Tourism Suishin Jigyo*, Yamaguchi Prefecture, Fact Sheet

Yamaguchi Prefectural Government also supports some local NPOs to replicate the Suo Oshima model in other locations in this prefecture. For example, Yamashiro district in Iwakuni City is offering a green tourism program with river activities for school excursionists. However, School Excursion Programs in Yamashiro district are relatively new and are not yet commercialized (Table 8).

Table 8 Rural-oriented school excursionists to Yamaguchi Prefecture by regions in 2012

| | |
|---------------------|---------------------------|
| Suo Oshima: | 22 Schools, 3914 Students |
| Yamashiro District: | 2 Schools, 303 Students |
| Hagi City: | 1 School, 110 Students |
| Nagato City: | 1 School, 84 Students |

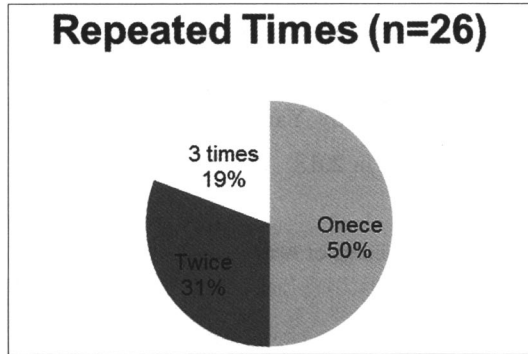
Source: Yamaguchi Prefecture (2013) *Yamaguchi Slow Tourism Suishin Jigyō*, Yamaguchi Prefecture, Fact Sheet

The Yamaguchi Prefectural Government is also allocating a share of its budget for volunteer activities in the Yamashiro district, especially for Yamaguchi University students since 2011. In addition to Life Guard training, Promotion Video making and Fishing instructions, a Japanese salamanders protection tour was added in 2012 (Table 9). However, one issue to consider is that only a small number of volunteer students repeat these activities (Table 10). Current data indicates that nearly half of all participants do such work only once.

Table 9 Protection of Japanese Salamanders in Yamashiro District, 2012

Source: Photo by author

Table 10 Volunteer Students from Yamaguchi University to Yamashiro Project in 2012



Source: Made by author

Yamaguchi Prefecture has both natural and historical resources. For example, Hagi City, Yamaguchi City and Hofu City have a number of historical structures and are well-known domestic destinations. As is apparent from the steady popularity of destinations like Nara, Kyoto and Kamakura, historical tourism destinations have traditionally been very popular among the Japanese. Unfortunately, the availability of high speed transportation system in Yamaguchi Prefecture works as a disadvantage for attracting overnight travelers, as many visitors prefer to make one-day trips. Yamaguchi city and its neighboring cities have recently developed a historical trail walking path with a beautiful natural environment, called “Hagi Ohkan”, and it is hoped that this trail is able to attract more visitors; not only for walking but also for running events.

Yamaguchi Prefecture is also trying to replicate this trail, just like the experience of Suo Oshima. For example, a trail called “Akamagaseki Kai-do”, from Hagi City to Shimonoseki City via Mine City was re-developed, and organizers started to offer walking events since 2011 (Table 11). However, like School Excursion Programs in Yamashiro district, Akamagaseki

Kaido Walking events are relatively new and are not yet commercialized. In order to become commercialized events, a large number of volunteer staffs is needed for these events. Some progress can be noted on this front: student volunteer supported by Yamaguchi Prefecture to maintain the Akamagaseki Kaido started in 2013.

Table 11 Participants of Akamagaseki Kaido Walk 2014



Source: Photo by Author

As Mine City is also trying to be a Geo Park destination, some of the students are also recruited as volunteer staffs by the local people to make up for the lack of human resources due to of aging and depopulation of Mine City. Mine City also started some monitoring tours by Yamaguchi University students since 2014. Some groups of students from other prefectures played the role of tourists and this project also expanded to international students soon after the success of this domestic monitoring (Table 12).

Table 12 Meeting with International Students in 2014



Source: Photo by Author

Conclusion

This paper offered a brief general description of rural and green tourism background research in Japan and explored a few cases from the mountainous Yamaguchi Prefecture to assess potential and challenges. It was observed that rural tourism became ‘standardized’ as ‘green tourism’ in the 1990s, mainly due to initiatives at the national level. The main focus of green tourism is urban-rural interaction to sustain declining rural societies. These initiatives are not solely top-down ventures, as rural areas in Japan have been threatened with high depopulation and aging rates for decades and there is a strong local awareness and willingness; to support green tourism activities.

This awareness is strongly felt at the prefecture level, but is present at the individual village level also, testified by success stories from Oita, Iwate and Nagano. In the Chugoku region, Yamaguchi and Shimane Prefectures have been active in devising tourism solutions for mountainous villages, based on the concept of rural lifestyle experience tours and vil-

lage stays. Prefectural level initiatives are backed up by local NPO involvement and Yamaguchi Prefecture has steadily encouraged school students to become familiar with the rural scenario. Yamaguchi Prefecture is also steadily rising as a popular rural tourism destination at the national level, augmented by its successful projects like the Suo Oshima excursions and Hagi Ohkan walking trail. These provide more tourist experiences and destinations in Yamaguchi in addition to the existing popular tourist destinations that attract visitors throughout the year.

As this case shows, Green tourism is becoming popular in Japan. Some of the local authorities are actively trying to introduce green tourism to revitalize local communities, with the urban-rural interchange concept. This is critical due to depopulation in rural areas, making human resources from the urban areas desirable for economic sustainability. However, like the case of Yamashiro district, the small number of repeat volunteers from universities poses one of the main problems for developing sustainable green tourism and merits future research to address this and other challenges.

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