1. Introduction

Ecotourism is a relatively new concept in the tourism industry, commonly said to have started at the first half of the 1980s. The International Ecotourism Society defines that “ecotourism is responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people” (Fennel 1999). In Japan, ecotourism was first and foremost promoted by the Ministry of Environment as a new form of tourism that helps protect the environment while generating economic benefit for surrounding communities (Shikida 2008). Nowadays, the promotion of ecotourism within Japan is taken charge of by the Japan Ecotourism Society (Shikida 2008) and its concept has somehow a wider application including part of rural-based tourism.

Known as an ideal theory, ecotourism faces many difficulties in practice. What makes it unreality is the contradiction within the term itself. For example, ecotourism is based on the principle of sustainability that tries to balance three dimensions: economic, social, and environmental functions. However, this target is too abstract to realize, e.g. it is hard to measure social or environmental benefit in order to compare to economic benefit. Another problem is the dilemma between a niche market and economic impact. Should ecotours be small, its generated economic profit would be too little to have an influential impact.

In this paper, the authors first discuss the development of ecotourism in Japan and the problems of the niche market against the need of economic profits. After that, we focus on a local government’s solution of targeting school excursion as to widen the market for ecotourism and its related issues with evidence of a case study in Iida City, Nagano. Finally, we conclude the paper with some recommendations for better applying the principle of ecotourism in practice based on school excursion.

2. Ecotourism development in Japan: from the difficulties of its niche market to the application of school excursion

The development of ecotourism in Japan can be divided into two stages: the diffusion and boom (the first stage), and the adaptation (the second stage) (Shikida & Morishige 2001). During these stages, the contradictory of a “niche market” and an economic-generating function has always been a big problem in realizing the ideal concept of ecotourism in practice.

The first stage: In the middle of the 1990s, UNWTO reported the boom of tourism industry in general and ecotourism in particular in Asian countries. Under this condition, tour operators started to over-utilize the concept to promote tourism activities in remote areas, particularly in natural-rich places such as in World Natural Heritage Sites. Evidence could be found in the case of Yakushima, which is now negatively reminded of as a bad example of ecotourism in Japan, particularly when tourism has brought about much damage to the surrounding environment (Matsumoto et al. 2004).

Realizing this fact, the Ministry of Environment took a more careful action on ecotourism. Unlike other Southeast Asian countries where ecotourism had quickly widespread after its diffusion, Japan applied this alternative form of tourism in a more cautious way (Tran 2010). To be specific, the Ministry of Environment chose Iriomote, a far most island, as a pilot for the applicability of ecotourism in this country (Kai zu & Maika 2001, Tomikawa 2003); and the former success of ecotourism in this island has been broadly promoted in many Asian countries, including Vietnam, through the Japan NGO’s networks in the late 1990s. Nevertheless, just as other place where the original form of ecotourism had developed, the ecotourism in Iriomote island started to face the problem of low income generating due to the limitation of tourist numbers (Okuda 2005). Whether ecotourism should be small and in contrast to mass tourism is a conversable topic in this period.

The second stage: The lessons learnt in the previous period made the government realize that Japan should not follow other Southeast Asian countries like Thailand, Indonesia, etc. to develop ecotourism in huge resorts in a mass form, but try to adapt it to fit the national identity. This strategy has been shown in the conference in 2004, in which they concluded with a much more open definition of ecotourism. Nowadays, the area for ecotourism activities is even expending to satoyama (里山).

In the progress, school excursion has been targeted as one of the major markets for ecotourism here and there. The reasons for choosing this market are not too hard to guess. In Japan, school excursions
are compulsory modules, thus, are reliable sources of tourists for a concrete destination. Secondly, pupils and students participating in these excursions are likely to keep in mind that they are not simply travelling but have to complete some kind of exercises or homework, which distinguishes them from other relax-based tourists. Moreover, in order to get a good credit, those students are most likely to follow their teacher’s guidance, which may result in a good impact on visited environment. Vice versa, natural beauty spots seem to be very interesting for young city pupils, who have less and less direct contact to the nature. For those reasons, school excursions have gradually been popular as a solution to broaden the market of ecotours, a type of tours which has been blamed to be not very attractive for ordinary tourists.

3. Targeting school excursion as the main market for ecotourism and its related issues, an evidence of Iida City, Nagano

Iida is a basin city to the south of Nagano Prefecture, the central Japan. 80% out of the 650-square-kilometre area of the city are covered by forests. Its population is approximately 110,000 people (2009) and the population density was 165 people per km square (2005). 28% of the population are over 65 years old (Japan Census 2005).

In 2005, the Minami Shinsyu Tourism Association (南信州観光公社), a joint stock company founded based on the cooperation of the local government, the tourism association, and several local communities, was presented with an Ecotourism Award for successfully applying ecotourism in school excursion. The model of tourism in Iida City was selected as one of the 13 places which had good projects of ecotourism and was provided with financial support by the Ministry of Environment (Ministry of Environment 2004). For that reason, the authors decided to analyze the ecotourism of this city to have a better understanding of the difficulties of this model after almost a decade of operation.

The research was implemented based on several fieldtrips in the last two years, with a number of personal interviews, non-participant and participant observations, questionnaire surveys, etc. The results can be summarized in the following points:
1) The numbers of visitors are very limited and have a downward trend (17000 students in 2007 to 14000 students in 2010. With the total of 20900 nights in 2010, nights spent in eco-accommodation of Ohdaira(bungalow accounts for only 4%, while that number of Japanese-style and Western-style hotels is 57.4%). Tourism seasonality is high (with peaks in summer) and often coincident with normal tourism seasons and agricultural seasons.
2) The revenue from tourism is promising (160 million JPY in 2010 or about 200 million USD) but not very profitable and encouraging when considering the market share in household’s overall income (from 1% to less than 10% for interviewed farmers).

To cope with these issues, the local government and private tourism enterprises developed several solutions as follows: promoting social impacts rather than just economic impacts among participating communities, endeavouring to make a wide network with schools and universities in other prefectures, having fixed dates to recruit the participants, and diversifying the contents of tour programs, etc. Very recently, the Iida City Hall has adopted field study tours for university students combining the advantages of voluntary spirits of young generations and the joint of cultural and intellectual exchanges among different university fellows, which is assessed as a highly creative form of old-fashioned school excursion.

4. Conclusion and suggestion

The paper summarizes the dilemma of niche market in ecotourism development in Japan and the rise of utilizing school excursions to increase the market for ecotourism based on the evidence of Iida City, Nagano Prefecture. It shows that at the local level, ecotourism in Japan is much more a regional development tool than a conservation tool or an economic generating solution. Consequently, the demand side has been taken much care of, which raises the risk of unsustainable development in the future. The authors recommend that the model of Iida City is a good example for other regions as long as a local community has a linkage close enough to maintain tourism with little economic benefit.

Main references


