

Nature-Based Tourism and Revitalization of Rural Communities in Japan: An Ethnographic Case Study of Oyama Town

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Abstract

This paper explores the community revitalization efforts through nature-based tourism in rural Japan. The high economic growth in the late 1980s brought a new trend of nostalgia for the countryside and a desire for rural space in domestic tourism, which went together with the demographic transition in rural Japan. Since the 1990s, many rural communities in Japan have turned towards the nature-based tourism as a ‘potential savior’ from the effects of long-term depopulation, aging, urban migration, and decreasing agricultural profitability. This paper is based on ethnographic field research in Oyama Town, located in Oita Prefecture in the southern island of Kyushu. Since the beginning of the new millennium, Oyama has embraced nature-based tourism activities in order to sustain its’ community. Oyama’s version of nature-based tourism includes themes like green tourism, landscape tourism and agriculture tourism. The research found that nature-based tourism activities in Oyama have helped the community members identify, conserve and capitalize on many latent local resources. The research also found that Oyama has succeeded in addressing the new market opportunities and acted accordingly. Nature-based tourism in Oyama has also increased the promotion of farm products and local culture, income opportunities for local women and elderly, and the diffusion of implicit knowledge on traditional rural lifestyles and environment. The findings provide an important lesson on how small communities in rural areas can be successful in sustaining their communities through community-oriented nature-based tourism, and thus have a wider significance for community revitalization in the face of extreme socio-economic transition.

Keywords: Nature-based tourism, Demographic transition, Community revitalization, Oyama Town, Rural Japan

1. Introduction: Nature-Based Tourism in Japan

High economic growth during the infamous ‘bubble economy’ in the 1980s brought a surge in the construction and development as well as domestic tourism sectors in Japan. The land price was swelling exponentially, which attracted private sectors’ involvement in mass construction and development investment. This resulted in increasing urbanization. In response, the central government under the Resort Development Law of 1987 encouraged these private sectors to invest in large-scale resort development such as ski resorts, golf courses, marinas, big hotels, etc. in the countryside (Goto, 1993; Kitano, 2009). A new trend of nostalgia for the countryside and a desire for rural space as such increased in Japan’s domestic tourism as it grew from 1.2 million yen in 1963 to 3.8 trillion yen by 1980 (Partner, 2004). On the contrary, these resort development projects increased the land prices in rural areas, adversely affecting the local economy as well as the environment (Goto, 1993).

In response to this problem, the National Land Agency published a report in 1994 recommending that resort development in rural areas should provide the tourists an opportunity of ‘experiencing rural life’ and facilitate exchange between urban and rural people (Furukawa, 2007). As a result, two important trends emerged during this period: *chakuchi-gata kankō* (place-specific tourism), which emphasizes the importance of ‘experiencing rural life’ and *shizen-gata kankō* (nature-based tourism), which underlines the concept of ‘rural-urban interaction’ (Miyashita, 2006; Aoki, 2010; Takata, 2013). Of late, nature-based tourism is largely used for a wide range of tourist activities like green tourism, ecotourism, agricultural tourism, community forestry and fishing, landscape tourism and other rural based activities in order to revitalize the rural communities in Japan. Among these, “green tourism” became most popular when the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) published “the new direction of food, agriculture and rural community policy” in 1992, which is otherwise known as the “new policy”, promoting “green tourism” as a means of revitalizing rural areas (Hosoya & Sato, 2005). The MAFF defines “green tourism” as “a form of leisure activity based on visitor stay in rural communities and enjoying the interaction between nature, culture and people” (MAFF, n. d.). Two years later, in 1994, the Japanese Government introduced the Green Tourism Law. This law promoted activities including weekend farm stays (*shūmatsu nōhaku*), one-day agricultural experiences (*higaeri nōgyō taiken*) and rural shopping at roadside stations (*michi-no-eki*). Since then, many rural areas in Japan have been actively practicing green tourism activities. The “romantic nature” of rural areas has also been seen as “traditional” and therefore “Japanese”—“an attractive escape” for busy urbanites. Meanwhile, the Ministry of the Environment started the promotion of ecotourism tours to United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Natural Heritage sites and to national parks in Japan under the *ekotsūrizumu suishin-hō* (the Act on Promotion of Ecotourism), which was enacted in 2007. As the volume of these nature-based tourist activities increased, many farming households started to implement the green tourism activities through *minpaku* (farmhouse-stay). The Green Tourism Law of 1994 set up a registration system for rural

households to register as certified *minpaku*. As a result, many certified *minpaku* communities started to appear in the Japanese rural areas. The economic benefit of these *minpaku* is crucial in communities with no major industries as they provide close-to-home jobs for female and aging farmers. Another important aspect is that, nature-based tourism is not merely about visiting rural communities but also associated with sustainable livelihood education for urban people (Sidali et al., 2011; Francis et al., 2012).

2. The Changing Rural Communities in Japan

Many rural areas in contemporary Japan portray a picture of decline. Some rural communities in very remote areas have died away, while rural communities in the surrounding urban periphery have been absorbed in the urban encroachments. The rapid economic growth started from the 1950s dragged much of the rural population away from the countryside. As a result, the farm population decreased dramatically, and part-time farming started to prevail among the farmers. Farms were run by women and old people. This farming is known as the *san-chan-nōgyō* (“three-chan agriculture”) where *oji-chan* (grandpa), *obā-chan* (grandma), and *okā-chan* (mother) work the farm while the father is off working somewhere else. This is more acute in the hilly and mountainous areas (*chūsankanchiiki*). In 1970 the central government recognized the problem of exodus from these areas and passed the Mountain Village Promotion Law. Under this law, more than 60 percent of towns and villages in Shimane, Kochi, and Oita prefectures were considered to be in danger as they had lost more than 10 percent of their population in the past ten years (Morii, 1995). In fact, the total population in towns and villages in Japan dropped from 45.8 million in 1920 to 34.6 million in 1960, 27.9 million in 1980 to 11.9 million in 2010.

Another worrying factor is the increasing aging of rural population. In recent times, Japan has shifted from an aged society to a hyper-aged society (*chōkōrei shakai*) (Coulmas, 2007). Social aging has become one of the great challenges as the *dankai no sedai* (the postwar baby boom generation) started to retire en masse in 2007. The aged population, i.e. people aged over 65 years, was only 5 percent in 1950, but jumped to 23 percent in 2010, and is expected to increase 30 percent in 2025 (MLIT, 2015). The term “*genkai shūraku*” (marginalized community) emerged and attracted scholarly as well as policy attention, where more than 50 percent of the population is aged over 65 (Ohno, 2008). In 2007, there were 7873 “marginalized communities” in Japan, and 425 of these might disappear entirely within 2017 (MLIT, 2007). The function of community has debilitated in the aged and depopulated rural areas. Moreover, by 2005, many rural municipalities had merged with neighboring larger cities or towns in accordance with the *shichōson gappei tokurei-hō* (Cities, Towns, and Villages Amalgamation Law), known popularly as the “*heisei no dai gappei*”, enacted in 1999. The total number of towns and villages decreased from 3013 in 1960 to only 941 by 2010. The Great East Japan Earthquake of March 11, 2011, coupled with subsequent tsunami and nuclear power plant disasters, has also posed critical concerns on the future of many depopulated disadvantaged communities in rural Japan.

On the other hand, regional development earned priority in the state policies in the 1970s. Under the Rural Industry Promotion Act of 1971, attempts were made to establish

non-agricultural *jiba sangyō* (local industries) with the hope to stem the exodus of young people from the rural areas to the urban. Consequently, various regional industry promotion projects (*jiba sangyō shinkō jigyō*) thrived. Moreover, the shift from construction and industry to leisure and tourism, and the demands for a cleaner environment went together. Since the mid-1980s, living conditions for rural residents and farmers, and the capacity of maintaining rural amenities such as green space for urban people are identified as major tasks. This fitted with the images of *furusato* (a native place, home). In 1984, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) adopted the *furusato-zukuri* (creation of *furusato*) under the *Nipponrettō furusato-ron* (Proposal for *Furusato* Japan) as “the affective cornerstone of domestic cultural policy” (Robertson, 1991). In 1988, Prime Minister Takeshita Noboru introduced the “*furusato sōsei jigyō*” (*Furusato* Re-Creation Project). From 1988 to 1989, under this project, grants of 100 million yen were allocated to every municipality in rural areas to promote *furusato-zukuri*. This resulted in the “retro boom”, nostalgia became policy. Nostalgia tourism on remote areas became popular among travel marketing campaigns. The slogan of the Japan National Tourist Organization (JNTO) reflected this phenomenon—“Japan... where the past greets the future” (Creighton, 1997). At the same time, *machizukuri jigyō*, usually rendered “village/town revitalization projects” into English, everywhere reflected the *furusato* themes.

The Uruguay Round of multilateral trade negotiations within the framework of General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) ended in 1994. In the previous year, in December 1993, Japan decided to open the rice market on limited basis under the *gaiatsu* (international pressure). This liberalization of agriculture had resulted in the steady decline in economic value of primary industries. On the other hand, in 1999, the Basic Law on Agriculture was changed to the Basic Law on Food, Agriculture and Rural Areas. The law identified the need for overall rural development for the first time. It also acknowledged the multiple functions of Japanese agriculture—i.e. stable production in rural areas, conservation of national land, water resources, natural environment, and cultural tradition. Furthermore, in 2000, a new *chūsankanchiiki-tō chokusetsu shiharai seido* (Direct Payment System for Hilly and Mountainous Areas) to farmers in disadvantaged communities in return for their efforts in conserving environmental and cultural resources was introduced by the MAFF. They were paid a flat rate subsidy depending on their land category (Saika, 2010). Accordingly, nature-based tourism like green and ecotourism became popular as many rural communities, particularly those in mountainous areas started to engage in green tourism activities as being done in parts of Europe (Jussaume, 2003). In spite of the popularity and expectations, only a relatively few rural communities have successfully implemented the nature-based tourism vision, which offer significant prospects and merit academic inquiry.

3. Research Method

This research is based on a single case study method. The single case study method became the most popular research method in postwar Japan, especially amongst the numerous foreign scholars on rural Japan (Note 1). I used ethnography as a method of data collection as ethnography help ethnographer engage on those being researched and understand what causes and effects influence their viewpoints (Cook & Crang, 1995). And, since the central

characteristic of ethnography is fieldwork, I carried out fieldwork spanning a period of three years in Oyama Town, located in the southern island of Kyushu in Japan, in order to understand the “real-life situations” (Burgess, 1982). Oyama Town was selected as it is not only the origin of the One Village, One Product (OVOP) Movement, the most widely known example of contemporary rural development in Japan, but also the community development efforts are originated and developed within the local Oyama community that holds rich history. Every year many Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) trainees across the globe visit Oyama in order to learn and experience the Oyama-way of rural development. In-depth interviews and participant observation were used for the fieldwork.

This research is qualitative in nature, which allowed me to compare the significance of the findings across multiple levels (Patton, 2002; Creswell, 2003). I used extensive and detailed description, i.e. thick description (Note 2) for analysis. The findings were triangulated with secondary data to see overlaps, divergence or other meaningful patterns for the general background and wider significance, which is essential in ethnographic research (Brewer, 2000).

4. Case Study: Nature-Based Tourism in Oyama Town

In this paper, I look at the case of nature-based tourism in Oyama Town. It is a small town located at the western part of the Oita Prefecture adjacent to the northern part of the Hita City, situated inside the Hita Basin. Bordering on Fukuoka and Kumamoto Prefectures, Oyama is located along the banks of the Oyama River, which divides the town into two parts: the East Oyama and the West Oyama. Surrounded by cedar-forested mountains, the total land area of Oyama is 45.72 square kilometers of which mountainous *sugibayashi* (cedar-forests) make up 53 percent, while agricultural lands account for only 9 percent. Like most of the other mountainous communities in rural Japan, the population of Oyama is also shrinking. At the time of fieldwork, Oyama had 3386 inhabitants living in 1000 households with an aging rate of 31.2 percent (the aging rate for Japan was 23 percent). The residents of these households were living in 34 small *shūraku* (settlements) located alongside the subsidiaries of the Oyama River and in valleys between the surrounding cedar-forest mountains. On 22 March, 2005, Oyama Town was amalgamated with the neighboring Hita City. Despite such changing backdrops, Oyama is deemed as a model community of successful nature-based tourism and community development visions.



Figures 1 & 2. “100-year-forest” in *Taraibaru* settlement

Oyama’s journey towards nature-based tourism dates back to the early 1990s. In 1991, two unprecedented typhoons hit Oyama, causing catastrophic damage to the planted forests—mostly comprise of cedar and cypress trees. After the typhoons in 1991, discussions on the state of the mountain forests and their management took place in various parts of the town. Oyama devised a seven year project for a new forest planting program called the “Beautiful Forest Creation”. It was decided that a community forest would be developed within 10 hectares of land that had been decided to become a landfill sediment site by the Oyama Dam in the *Taraibaru* settlement. Subsequently, the landowners provided land and labor, the town helped funding, and volunteers from Fukuoka City joined the community forest development, called the *100-nen no morizukuri* (creation of “100-year-forest”) (Figures 1 & 2 above). Disaster-resistant broadleaf trees were planted in the land, which would not be cut down for at least 100 years, hence the name “100-year-forest” (Ogata, 2012). In this community forest creation, residents living in the downstream also participated and planted trees. The volunteer activities in the “100-year-forest” project had given impetus to the future nature-based tourism activities in Oyama as the local people from the upstream, for the first time, worked together (planting trees or weeding or thinning.) with the volunteers from the downstream (Fukuoka City).

However, Oyama’s version of active nature-based tourism includes three phases: the creation of the *Ogirihata* Green Tourism Association (herewith referred as the OGTA) in 2003, the foundation of the G-West in 2009, and the recent landscape and agriculture tourism efforts.

4.1 *Ogirihata* Green Tourism Association (OGTA)

The word “green tourism” was known to the Oyama people since 1995. However, most of the local people did not really understand the contents of green tourism. It was the Koda

Household that first realized the importance of the green tourism and wanted to popularize it to Oyama people. In order to do so, in 1998, the Koda Household started from its own *Kabu* settlement. However, only the Higuma Household came forward and joined this new venture as green tourism was relatively new concept to the locals and there was no guaranty that it would be successful. The others were waiting to see how it would turn out. Since the initiative was taken by two households of a single tinny settlement, it did not spread to entire Oyama Town. However, the pursuit of green tourism at community level in Oyama dates back to early 2000s, when Oyama actively started this venture with guidance from the prefectural government.



Figure 3. *Ogirihata* settlement in Oyama

After the collapse of the bubble economy, *Ogirihata*—one of the small settlements located in the *Ushuku* area of the West Oyama (Figure 3 above)—was experiencing a shrinking population with aging and low birth rate, lack of successors and agricultural price decreases (OGTA, n. d.). As a result, an increasing amount of farmland was being left alone. These concerns made *Ogirihata* residents feel that they needed to take some kind of measure to retain their community.

In 2001, *Ogirihata* residents received information on the Direct Payment System for Hilly and Mountainous Areas through the *yakuba* (town office) (Ibid.). All 37 households of *Ogirihata* decided to take part in the scheme with all of their farmland. To begin with, residents of these households participated in the weeding of unused farmland in *Ogirihata* and started to think for effective measures to deal with such farmland (Ibid.). In the following year, the *yakuba* provided information on a course in “green tourism”. *Ogirihata* decided to send the agricultural manager (who happened to be also an officer of the Steering Committee of the Direct Payment System in *Ogirihata*) to participate in the course as a representative of *Ogirihata* (Ibid.). The potential of Green Tourism was studied in the Steering Committee as a measure to maintain farmland in *Ogirihata*. Residents of *Ogirihata* were also worried about

the likely impending merger of Oyama with Hita City, which, if realized, would decrease the level of support of the municipal government that they used to get before. This made them realized that they should take proper actions to develop the community themselves. Thus, at the regular general assembly of the community, the officer responsible for the Direct Payment System proposed that the community should adopt “green tourism” despite of planning any concrete activities at the time. It was believed that these activities would be devised in the process of developing the activities (Ibid.). The proposal was passed and all the 37 households of *Ogirihata* unanimously decided to participate in the tourism activities.

At first, they formed a number of groups and started to identify and learn about the resources of their community that could be utilized in the green tourism activities. For example, a history and culture group studied the history and the traditional culture of *Ogirihata*. They learned from books like “Visiting History” that mentioned the shrines (e.g. the *Ushuku Shrine*) and historical sites (e.g. the grave of a saintly Buddhist monk) in *Ogirihata* (Ibid.). Another group learned rural craftworks from elderly residents, and a third group learned traditional ways of cooking from an elderly woman of *Ogirihata*. Eventually, these study groups were able to identify many kinds of things in *Ogirihata* as “community resources”, which are now utilized in the *Ogirihata* green tourism activities, including the *Ushuku Shrine*; an 800-year-old elm tree; water of *Oike* (pond); the grave of a saintly Buddhist monk; the *Hadaka Matsuri* (Naked Festival) (Note 3); traditional crafts including vine basket weaving, making straw *zoris* (Japanese sandals) and bamboo brooms, ancient skills in charcoal making, rural cooking and food processing; plum, pickled plums and farming; and the *hotaru* (fireflies).

The households of *Ogirihata* also went to Ajimu Town, one of the pioneers of green tourism in Oita Prefecture, in order to gain first-hand experiences in green tourism activities. Mori Tamiko, a member of the OGTA, told me about the early stage of the association while I was talking to her on October 22, 2010.

“Before launching the OGTA, Kurokawa Teruko’s husband who used to be a member of the town assembly, went to Ajimu Town to learn what green tourism is all about as we didn’t have any idea on ‘green tourism’ activities in order to reactivate *Ogirihata*. At first, we thought that as the mountain is green, so ‘green tourism’ is something like that. Eventually, we also went to Ajimu Town in 1999, and studied the town for two years either by learning from the history or from our own experiences that we gained while staying. We used these two years as ‘preparation period’. We stayed at and experienced the *minpaku* (farmhouse-stay) in a form of two people by rotation”.

In October 2003, 40 students from Kawaguchi High School of Saitama prefecture came to *Ogirihata* for study tour, and stayed in *Ogirihata* (Ibid.). This was the first time people came to *Ogirihata* for farmhouse-stay. Green tourism activities in *Ogirihata* attract visitors especially when the plum trees are in full bloom and the *ume matsuri* (Plum Festival) is on from mid-February to mid-March. Although all the 37 households in *Ogirihata* received the subsidy of the Direct Payment System, however, only 10 households are now actively practicing the green tourism activities in *Ogirihata*. These 10 households are focusing on

three major activities: i) environment and/or landscape; ii) *minpaku*; and iii) exchange and development of local specialties. Environment related activities involve preserving the historical sites, ancient tradition, and the aesthetic appeal of rural landscape either by emphasizing on the existing wooden and stone structures or by ensuring minimal disturbance to the natural environment while implementing new development policies. Moreover, five households hold the qualification of *minpaku*, and three households are actively practicing products development and farm work related activities. However, environmental issues are the main concerns among these three activities.

As a part of environment activities, they started a concert called the *hotaru konsāto* (Firefly Concert) in the *Ogirihata* Valley in order to resurrect the fireflies. They released fries of fireflies, and cut the grasses around the vicinity of the valley. As a result, the fireflies increased considerably at summertime. The Firefly Concert was first held in June 2007, after Kurokawa Hirofumi, a resident of *Ogirihata*, proposed an idea of utilizing these wonderful summertime fireflies as *community resources* and sharing them with visitors coming from outside of the town. Hence, one of the best outcomes of green tourism activities in *Ogirihata* was that it made local residents to identify, learn, value and preserve many latent resources they have in their community. On the other hand, experiences in the farm work type activities include simple farm works such as, plum farming and/or harvesting, making pickled plum, farming small varieties of vegetables, farming *enoki* mushroom, making pickled vegetables, cooking with plum, charcoal making, etc. Many local residents see such activities through green tourism as a means of sustainable community development. The current squad leader of the OGTA claimed that:

“There is no guarantee that the relationships among the communities or the parent-child relationships will continue to follow in the future. As a method of creating a sustainable community, one of the third sectors like the green tourism can play a pivotal role. The purpose of green tourism is to create a sustainable parent-child relationship as well as a sustainable relationship among the communities” (Interview on August 24, 2012).

4.2 G-West

The second phase of nature-based tourism in Oyama starts with the birth of a new kind of tourism organization in the G-West. Here “G” refers to “Green”, and “West” means “western part” of Oita Prefecture. The G-West was launched in 2009 with about 50 households of three *san-chō* (three towns) in Oita Prefecture including Kusu Town, Kokonoe Town and Oyama Town. G-West holds the qualification of *ippan shadanhōjin* (General Incorporated Foundation). The G-West activities involve mainly *minpaku*, mostly for students and training sessions for *minpaku*. The five households that had the qualification of *minpaku* in the OGTA joined together with the G-West. Hence, all households of the OGTA are not part of the G-West. The G-West was established with its’ withdrawal from the Oita Prefecture Green Tourism Association (herewith referred as the OPGTA). There was a dispute between the then Chairman Miyata Seiichi and the then Vice-chairman Sato Haruo of the OPGTA. Miyata is originally from Ajimu Town, whereas Sato hails from Kokonoe Town. Because of the dispute, Sato was trying to launch a new organization in the western part of Oita Prefecture. At its’

inception, many other municipalities including Amagase Town, Yabakei Town, Nakatsue Village and Hita City also joined the G-West. But after the dispute, these municipalities wanted to remain in the prefectural organization. After many deliberations, only three towns, that is, Kusu Town, Kokonoe Town and Oyama Town, had finally withdrawn them from the OPGTA and launched the G-West. These three towns had a strong network, and are now working as a powerful group.

In this new G-West, Kusu Town and Kokonoe Town are called by their judicial names, however, in the case of Oyama Town, instead of Oyama Town, it is known as “*Ogirihata*”. This is because *Ogirihata* had already started the *Ogirihata* Green Tourism. Therefore, without calling it “Kusu, Kokonoe and Oyama”, the G-West became to be known as “Kusu, Kokonoe and *Ogirihata*”. In other words, there are three towns in the G-West, and the green tourism activities in each of these three towns are known as the “Kusu Green Tourism”, the “Kokonoe Green Tourism”, and the “*Ogirihata* Green Tourism” respectively.

Contents of the tourism activities between the OPGTA and the G-West are different. The OPGTA is considering the visitors as tourists and providing them a customer treatment. In other words, it is more hospitable to the visitors. On the other hand, the G-West is treating the visitors as “members of the community” not as tourists. The OPGTA although receives money, is practicing green tourism voluntarily. Therefore, it accepts a small number of visitors. Because of the small number of the visitors, it has less revenue. But, the G-West is conducting green tourism activities for a living. Hence, it accepts a large number of visitors or at least four to six visitors since accepting one or two visitors does not make a profit, and hence has high revenue. The biggest difference between the OPGTA and the G-West perhaps is the way they arrange the tourism activities for the visitors. For example, activities in the OPGTA follow a “manifesto” whereby a *taiken menyū* (list of hands on activities) is readily available. In other words, it is *yarase* (prearranged). However, the G-West does not follow any menu; content of activities differs from one household to another and hence is *honmono* (real). The activities are more mysterious as they are unknown to the visitors until the appropriate time. The G-West helps visitors genuinely experience rural life. However, both organizations deal with the urbanites, and most importantly, both ensure that the visitors do the activities while enjoying.

Minpaku (Farmhouse-Stay)

In collaboration with the OGTA, the G-West is practicing green tourism activities through *minpaku* whereby around 1500 students are now coming annually to stay in the farmers’ houses. Many visitors stay in the farmers’ houses as there are no hotels in Oyama. This allows them to gain first-hand experience on the farmers’ lifestyles, and build intimate social relationships with the farming communities.

Table 1. *Minpaku* pricing schedule

Classification	<i>Minpaku</i> stay per night (including 2 meals)	Meals	<i>Taiken</i> (hands on activities)
Junior high school student	6000 yen	500 yen	500 yen
High school student	6000 yen	500 yen	500 yen
General visitor	From 6500 yen	From 500 yen	From 500 yen

By 2009, a total of 10 households in Oyama had gained *minpaku* licenses under the registration system of the Green Tourism Law of 1994, and were accepting overnight visitors. However, now eight households are actively practicing *minpaku*. These include three households from *Ogiri-hata* settlement, three from *Matsubara* settlement and two from *Kabu* settlement. Two households that are not presently accepting overnight visitors include the Kurukawa Household and the Mori Household. The *minpaku* certificates are typically displayed in the *genkan* (entrances) or in the kitchens of these households. Next to these certificates, *minpaku* pricing schedules are also displayed. The above Table 1 is an English version of the schedule that lists overnight stay, meal and *taiken* (hands on activities) prices for junior high school students, high school students and general visitors. *Minpaku* in Oyama provides “close-to-home jobs” for women and also creates income opportunities for the elderly residents.



Figures 4 & 5. Hands on activities by junior high school students during *minpaku*

Visitors participate in various hands on activities during their stay at the *minpaku*. The above Figures 4 and 5 portray hands on activities during *minpaku* where one group of students is learning traditional cooking while another group is participating in vegetables harvesting. The meals served to visitors at the *minpaku* also vary from one household to another. However, farm wives make the food they normally would for their families without adding anything special. This warrants two purposes: first, ensuring visitors to experience real rural cooking, and second, preventing any health problem that might occur by eating different food.

Furthermore, green tourism activities through *minpaku* in Oyama place more importance on education and spiritual richness of all parties involved. According to Mori Tamiko, their objective is to increase students' moral education (interview on October 22, 2010). In 2009, G-West first started to accept students for overnight stay. In that year, students from 17 schools stayed for 3304 nights, and in the fiscal year of 2012, students from 12 schools visited Oyama for green tourism activities and stayed for 2807 nights (Koda Kazumi, interview on March 28, 2013).

4.3 Landscape and Agriculture Tourism

The last phase of nature-based tourism in Oyama includes two recent trends: landscape tourism of Koda's Rhododendron Park and agriculture tourism of Isuma-Hime-no-Sato.

Koda's Rhododendron Park

Now Japan's biggest problems are aging and the declining birth rate. The number of people over 60 years is increasing, and on the contrary, the number of people under the age of 60 is decreasing gradually—Japan is becoming an “aging society” (*kōreika shakai*). Measures need to be taken not only in national level, but also in local and individual level. People over the age of 60 are getting older; however, they are the *fuyūsō*, “the wealthy classes”. These people are rich—have retirement money, substantial savings, and the pension—so much so that they are dubbed *rōjin kizoku* (the elderly nobility) (cf. Coulmas, 2007). On the other hand, the *yoka jikan* (leisure time) is gradually increasing in Japan. In spite of having enough leisure time, the *gaishutsu* (going out) of young people is less. On the contrary, older people have more leisure time and hence are active travellers. It is technically possible to travel around between 60 and 80 years of age—a period of 20 years. Therefore, the older people are creating new market opportunities for service providers in tourism industry (Shoemaker, 2000; Coulmas, 2007; Funck, 2008). Most of the older people prefer the *kenkō ryokō* (health tours). For example, they travel to hot springs or countryside gourmets or *shizen taiken ryokō* (nature experience tours), which are good for health.



Figure 6. Koda's Rhododendron Park

In response to the new market opportunities, West-Japan's largest *shakunage kōen* (Rhododendron Park) was officially opened in April 2012 (Figure 6 above). The park was established by Koda—a retiree from the Oyama *yakuba*, and a member of the OGTA, the G-West and a certified *minpaku* household in Oyama. In 2002, Koda started the landscape gardening on a mountain that he owns; hoping that beautiful flowers and mountain views would attract many tourists, especially the older tourists.

The total area of the park is 6.5 hectares (65 000 square meters). He invested his retirement money and the compensation that he received from the Oyama Dam into the park. He started with the felling of cedar trees, and the fostering of seedlings on his own. He collected the seedlings from the Yabe Village in the Fukuoka Prefecture. After nurturing the seedlings for three years, Koda started planting. In total he has planted over 20 000 rhododendron plants of 100 varieties with a cost of 20 million yen. He also built the trails, *koya* (bunkhouses), restrooms, and parking lot himself which cost him additional 10 million yen or so and it costs about 1.5 million yen per year to maintain the park. When I asked him the reasons why he chose rhododendrons, he replied:

“My mountain is suitable for alpine plants. When I thought to do landscape gardening, obviously I wanted to plant something that would suit the topography and at the same time be attractive. To begin with, I examined nearby famous *tsutsuji* (azalea) and *shakunage* (rhododendron) sites. *Miyakonojō* of Miyazaki Prefecture and *Ōmura* of Nagasaki Prefecture, as far as I know, are famous for rhododendron. Hundreds of thousands of tourists visit there in every year. Moreover, *shakunage* are in full bloom from April to early May. This is also when the weather gets warmer and a lot of people travel, especially in the Golden Week holidays (Note 4). I think travelling in April and May is the perfect time for experiencing nature in Japan. The *shakunage* season also does not overlap, and therefore does not compete, with the *ume matsuri* (plum festival). Hence, I started the *shakunage kōen* (Rhododendron Park) in Oyama. Another thing is that, as I started late, I thought I should do something that would be new and unique to other *shakunage* sites. I ended up with two specific characteristics: the first one is width, i.e., the scale (6.5 hectares), and the second one is the number of plants (20 000). I thought I could design the park with these two features” (interview on October 23, 2010).

Since the official opening of the park in April 2012, around 5000 visitors have visited. However, this is about half that Koda had hoped to achieve in the first year. Most of them were above 60 years of age, coming from Fukuoka and Kitakyushu. There were also visitors from Oita, Kagoshima, and as far as from Osaka. Contrary to the expectations, few local people visited the park. Koda takes 500 yen as entry fee. The park also sells pickled plums, vegetables, rhododendron plants, soft drinks and mineral water chilled in the running water of a mountain spring. Koda plans to complete the remaining works of the park in five years, and aims to have over 100 000 visitors per season.

With the compensation and retirement money, Koda could easily live a comfortable life. However, he continued to work hard by creating a local industry that would attract people, and hence, contribute to Oyama's development:

“I call it *jiba sangyō*—the word *jiba* has two different meanings, “local” and also “magnet” (with different Chinese characters, but the same pronunciation). And *sangyō* means “industry”. I wanted to create a local industry that would function like magnet, and bring people to Oyama. I think this area would reactivate if 200 000 tourists come to visit here annually. In order to become an initiator of this reactivation process, I set out the plan of Rhododendron Park almost a decade ago. I believe that creating a Rhododendron Park rather than making a beautiful community center or building a worthy luxurious sewage system, would attract people to come to visit this area. I also think that the best way is to create a system where the people who are left by the dam in this area would receive money from the visitors. Even if 30 000 or 50 000 visitors come to the Rhododendron Park, then the young people might be motivated, and might start doing things like this as well” (interview on November 7, 2010).

4.4 Agriculture Tourism: *Itsuma-Hime-no-Sato*



Figure 7. Planned site for the Konohana Garten Itsuma-Hime-no-Sato Flower Park

In 1990, the Oyama Agricultural Cooperative (*nōkyō*) created the farmers’ market in the Konohana Garten where Oyama’s farmers sell their own products directly to the consumers. In addition to this direct sales store, the *nōkyō* wanted the consumers to eat the local products, and therefore, created an organic restaurant in the early 2000s. However, in these two facilities consumers are unable to experience the plum picking, processing of pickled plums, rice harvesting, jam or bread making, and so on by themselves. In order to make the consumers experiencing the agriculture tourism activities as such, now the *nōkyō* is trying to create the “Konohana Garten Itsuma-Hime-no-Sato”—a kind of Flower Park—in the Itsuma Plateau in Amagase Town (Figure 7 above).

In 2010, the *nōkyō* had bought 20 hectares (200 000 square meters) of land in Isuma to create the park. A ten-year-plan was devised so that in the future the park would have a *hanazono* (flower garden) with flowers blooming all over the year. Inside the park there would be processing plants, places for dining and other facilities so that the urban consumers would visit the park, and enjoy by looking at the beautiful flowers, making rice, planting vegetables, making dishes, and so on. The *nōkyō* is trying to make a system where, although fanciful, after ten years in Oyama even there would not be enough young people, the urban visitors who would come to this park in some cases might move to Oyama to live or there would be an increasing number of seasonal workforce as well. This also means that the cooperative is targeting the people living in urban areas such as the neighbouring Fukuoka to as far as Osaka and Tokyo.

5. Discussion: Revitalizing the Rural Communities through Nature-Based Tourism: A Potential Savior?

From the foregoing description of the case study of community revitalization through nature-based tourism in Oyama, several interesting points stand out. These are appropriate for many Japanese rural communities, especially for depopulated graying communities in hilly-mountainous regions struggling for sustainable development.

Firstly, the case of Oyama indicates that because of the declining population augmented with other related problems, the social landscapes of Japanese rural communities have become more diverse. Many farm households in these communities are implementing nature-based tourism strategies, as being done in many European communities. By accepting visitors to stay at the *minpaku* and involving in various tourism activities, Oyama has promoted local agriculture through marketing farm products to visitors. This also contributed to the expansion of market, and thus, farmers of Oyama have shifted from only production (i.e. primary industry) to also marketing (i.e. service industry). Moreover, the creation of the OGTA and the G-West has resulted in community members identifying, conserving and capitalizing on many latent local resources. At the same time, nature-based tourism has created income opportunities, particularly for women and elderly, and also helped promote local Oyama culture to outsiders. In this sense, nature-based tourism has made the Oyama community to function as active body in its' revitalization efforts.

Secondly, it is also intriguing that due to the rural depopulation, demands on rural areas have increased further. They are no longer seen as the mere suppliers of agricultural, forestry and water resources, but also “idyllic places” for pastime of the urbanities. In other words, rural landscapes have become more “multifunctional”, and are often being utilized to meet the needs of the urban-oriented Japanese economy. This is indicative in the proposed park in Oyama. By implementing new concepts like agricultural tourism in Isuma-Hime-no-Sato, Oyama hopes to attract visitors from outside of the town, which in turn will contribute to the local economy as well as sustain the landscape and social structure of the town.

Thirdly, an obvious trend is the increasing number of amalgamation of small rural areas with the neighboring larger municipalities has created tensions between local communities and the policy makers on rural revitalization. Many rural communities in present-day Japan are

lagged behind in devising proper efforts of nature-based tourism due to the loss of judicial authority and substantial fund in local government brought by the amalgamation process. Nevertheless, the findings of this research suggest that a community can overcome this if it is *willing to develop from within*. In spite of the early guidance from the prefectural government, Oyama's rural revitalization efforts through nature-based tourism like the creation of the G-West are mostly planned, implemented and practiced by the ordinary community members. This is an important lesson for sustaining the "marginalized communities" in rural Japan.

Fourthly, it can be observed that one of the major objectives of nature-based tourism is the exchange between urban and rural people. Many communities are practicing this by organizing rural excursion tours for students, particularly for school students. The emphasis is on conservation of natural environment and moral education on traditional Japanese rural lifestyles. The findings of this research indicate that while practicing more on settlement level, Oyama's revitalization efforts through nature-based tourism is oriented towards providing tourists the atmosphere of the "traditional *inaka*" (countryside) life and facilitating the urban-rural interaction in the form of accepting students from neighboring larger cities. The older generations function like catalysts by providing traditional knowledge of the local history, landscape and ecosystems. Students' active participation in various hands on activities indicates that nature-based tourism also helped them develop good relationships with the Oyama residents.

Fifthly, it can be claimed that successful community revitalization efforts through nature-based tourism depend more on how well communities can address the market demands and act accordingly. The aging society of Japan has created increasing opportunities in nature-based tourism market, where senior tourists with substantial amount of savings are willing to spend more in landscape tourism—a new window of nature-based tourism. In Oyama's case, this has been translated into action in landscape gardening initiated by a local community member. The Rhododendron Park of Oyama is not merely a response of the new market needs, but also shows how rural revitalization efforts through nature-based tourism in Oyama has shifted from 'Oyama community' level to 'settlement' level to further 'individual' level.

Finally, in spite of the recent popularity of nature-based tourism and the increasing outflow of urbanities on weekends and holidays, only a relatively few rural communities like Oyama in Japan have succeeded in exploiting nature-based tourism as a pathway towards community revitalization. In Oyama's case, this is partly, due to its' distance to larger cities and largely, the efforts of transforming its' rural landscape in order to provide ecological as well as cultural services to the neighboring Fukuoka, Kumamoto and Oita populations. It is plausible to claim that while many rural communities in Japan look towards nature-based tourism as a potential savior from hyper-aging, shrinking population, lack of successors, declining agricultural profitability and environmental degradation, it is the only viable alternative where a balancing of market demands, recognizing latent resources, maintaining local identity, and sustainability are main concerns.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I discussed the case of community development efforts through nature-based tourism in rural Japan. I first looked at the general trends of nature-based tourism in rural Japan, and found that the role of rural landscape in contemporary Japan has been deemed as “multifunctional”—an idyllic place of escaping the busy lifestyles for the urbanities—by the policy makers, and thus, the agricultural patterns and the everyday lifestyles of the community living there have become more diverse and complex. I then described the overall condition of the rural communities, particularly those in hilly-mountainous areas, and observed that they are witnessing a common demographic transition towards the loss of judicial authority, the lack of agricultural successors, and the steady decreasing economic profitability of their primary industries. Under these circumstances, I concluded that nature-based tourism provides a ray of hope for these communities, and thus, has evolved as a potential savior for community revitalization. A particularly important finding of this study is that while many community revitalization ventures in rural Japan are being orchestrated by the central or prefectural bodies, they lack local voices. Oyama’s version of community revitalization through nature-based tourism is devised and implemented within the community where local residents identify and utilize the local resources. The lack of interventions and interest conflicts has helped Oyama succeed in community revitalization efforts, thereby playing a major role in contributing to sustain the local identity.

Finally, it is worth asking again, what insight can we gain from Oyama for community revitalization through nature-based tourism on a national or even global level? Nature-based tourism usually includes several common themes like green tourism, farmhouse-stay, agriculture tourism, landscape tourism and so forth. The central focus is on traditional agriculture practiced in rural settings. The demographic transition has jeopardized these idyllic settings as the farmers are hyper-aging and there are very few young people to inherit their implicit traditional knowledge. In spite of having such still-active human agencies, very few communities like Oyama have succeeded in translating their implicit knowledge into practice. Every year many schoolchildren visit to Oyama to experience and learn the rural lifestyles as well as the natural environment while staying at the farmhouses. Their active involvement ensures the diffusion of the farmers’ implicit knowledge. Therefore, an ethnographic study like this provides an important lesson on how small communities in rural areas can be successful in sustaining their communities through community-oriented nature-based tourism, and thus has a wider significance for community revitalization as well as sustainable tourism in general in the face of extreme socio-economic decline.

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Notes

Note 1. See for instances Norbeck (1954), Cornell & Smith (1956), Beardsley et al. (1959), Dore (1978), Brown (1979), Smith & Wiswell (1982), Bernstein (1983), Moeran (1984), Moon (1989), Bailey (1991), Ritchie (1999) and Partner (2004).

Note 2. The term “thick description” was first used by anthropologist Clifford Geertz in 1973.

Note 3. The festival involves local men wearing only *fundoshi* (loincloths), splashing themselves with ice-cold water and then running to the top of the mountain to the *Ushuku Shrine* in the middle of the night in winter.

Note 4. A string of national holidays in early May.

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