



Japan Local Government Centre

Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR), London

Local Japan: Case Studies in Place Promotion



Sustainable Tourism Brands in Hokkaido: Toya-Usu Geopark **Thomas Jones PhD, Assistant Professor, Meiji University**

Date City: 36,755

Toyoura Town: 4,443

Sobetsu Town: 2,917

Toyako Town: 10,225

TOTAL 54,340 (2010 data).



Toya-Usu is located on Hokkaido, Japan's north island which is a hotbed of sustainable tourism due to well-established positioning around nature. Within this sustainable tourism market, national parks are a vital asset; the six parks on Hokkaido have a halo effect which has long underpinned marketing campaigns.

Images of rugged scenery from Daisetsuzan's snow-capped peaks to Shiretoko's sea ice for example, are routinely used to suggest bountiful, unspoilt nature. Yet recent evidence suggests the parks' effectiveness as place brands may be in decline, whether appraised in terms of the realization of abstract targets (e.g. visitor image) or concrete ones (e.g. turnover). To investigate the former, a choice experiment was conducted to investigate the value which respondents attach to visiting Hokkaido's six national parks. The highest willingness to pay (WTP) was 80,767 JPY for Shiretoko, indicating that visitors are prepared to pay a premium for the UNESCO World Natural Heritage brand. The lowest WTP value was 16,476 JPY for Shikotsu-Toya (Shoji et al., 2010).

Next, turning to more concrete indicators, the annual number of visits to Hokkaido's six national parks had shrunk by more than 42% in 2008 compared to the peak in 1991, outstripping the national total which was estimated to have declined by 17%. Shikotsu-Toya National Park typified the state of the Hokkaido market with a reduction of 44% in 2009 compared to the peak in 1991, although it was still the most visited national park on

Hokkaido with an estimated 10 million annual visits. To investigate this rapid decline, Shikotsu-Toya will now be examined in more detail. Designated in 1949, it is Hokkaido's second largest national park covering an area of almost 1000 square km. located just 100km South West of Sapporo (the prefectural capital), or a 1.5 hours drive from Chitose Airport (the main gateway hub) it is portrayed as a convenient day-trip for visitors.



Constraints in national parks' role as a place brand

Shikotsu-Toya National Park is centred around two large lakes . Shikotsu and Toya . in a 110,000 year old caldera, and also contains many hot springs and extraordinary terrestrial movements due to the active volcano belt. Mt. Usu is the most prolific of these; a highly active stratovolcano estimated to be 10,000 to 20,000 year old, it has erupted nine times since 1663. Hence one important reason why the park's effectiveness as a place brand has declined to the extent that it ranks so poorly in terms of abstract (i.e. WTP) and concrete targets (i.e. decline in annual visitation) can be attributed to frequent natural disasters. In the immediate aftermath of the most recent eruptions in 1977 and 2000, the number of tourists declined rapidly due to continuing earthquakes, and negative press after landslides claimed two lives with a third person missing. Yet after a brief upturn, tough levels of security surrounding the 2008 G8 Summit . held at Lake Toya . prompted the numbers to decline again without any sign of a rebate. To explain this decline in visitor numbers to Shikotsu-Toya, or at least understand why there has been a lack of a concerted counter strategy on the behalf of national park management to reverse the trend, it is necessary to examine the fragmented nature of park administration. The MoE is the legal park administrator, via two regional offices and five areas, including the areas around the lakes, Toya and Shikotsu, Mt. Yotei and Jozankei, and the popular hot spring resort of Noboribetsu. But the five areas are scattered over a wide geographical area, making holistic management difficult, especially as the two MoE offices only have a combined roster of four full-time staff. Meanwhile designated parkland also overlaps with the administrative territory of no less than 14 municipalities, including six cities, seven towns and one village. This highly complex combination of stakeholders can have the unintended side-effect of pitting government agencies against each other. Nor is it a simple divide between national and local government, for even within the former category there are serious discrepancies in



management style and objectives.

A particular bone of contention is land management; 89% of the total parkland is national forest owned by the Forestry Agency whose objectives have traditionally been quite distinct from those of the MoE, favouring logging over conservation or tourism. Underlining this issue, recent research in the Shikotsu-Jozankei area used GIS to overlay the national forest management plan with that of the national park; the results confirmed that half the park boundaries were shared with the national forest and 36% with municipal boundaries (Aikoh and Tomidokoro, 2010).

This confirms that the national park plan was in effect zoned around a priori interests that are unrelated . and inconsistent . with park values.

In short, closer examination of Shikotsu-Toya supports the hypothesis that a range of administrative barriers, including those of the multi-objective, multi-tiered variety described above, are undermining the national park's ability to revitalize the area after the volcanic eruption. Instead of functioning as an efficient place brand which offers a policy platform for internal decision-making (i.e. uniting park stakeholders) while reaching out to external markets (i.e. tourists), the national park conversely adds extra layers of bureaucracy to land management systems. Further anecdotal evidence of this comes in the form of Toya-Usu's recent movement to gain independent recognition as a Global Geopark which is discussed in the next section.

Differences in geopark management agenda

In August 2009, Toya-Usu was among the first batch in Japan to be designated as a Global Geopark along with Itoigawa and Shimabara-hanto. The geopark area is not the same as that designated as national parkland; instead it overlaps with the territory of seven municipalities, covering a contiguous area of 1,180 square kilometres. The forerunner of a designation movement came in aftermath of the 2000 eruption, when the four municipalities

closest to Mt. Usu . Sobetsu Town, Toyako Town, Date City and Toyoura Town . grouped together in a show of solidarity to play an instrumental role in the reconstruction process. Within six months of the eruption a formal proposal had been registered to turn the area into an ecomuseum, materializing by 2002 into a concept which would pass down



the history of coexistence with the volcano, including disaster management technology, and promote regional development via resident participation, promote new coordination among neighbouring areas and foster local industries and tourism+ (Tanabe, 2009). By channelling the momentum which stemmed from a common desire to rebuild after the disaster, a series of symposiums and workshops were organized with local residents, and the joint Ecomuseum Promotion Council was subsequently established in November 2006. The overriding objective was defined as regional revitalization. The volcanic fallout had severely impact on the local economy, with the repair bill estimated to be in the region of 24 million yen (ibid). But the ecomuseum vision sought something more substantial than simple renovation; it was an integrated attempt by local municipal governments to use the funding opportunities and harness the momentum for renovation to create a place brand, integrating the existing tourism resources around the extended lakeside area into a single open-air museum. The eco-museum thus fulfilled both ETP criteria, categorized as both a geographical area considered whole in terms of activities and in terms of the services it offers to visitors.

Nevertheless, although there was an apparent need to repair infrastructure and revitalize the region after the volcanic devastation of 2000, why did the local municipalities go on to seek geopark certification in an area that already had an ecomuseum within a national park? Certainly there was an element of fortuitous timing, given that UNESCO had established the Global Geopark Networks in 2004. But although these process coincidences no doubt acted as additional stimuli, the initial ecomuseum concept had also laid a platform of core objectives which chimed with those of the International Network of Geoparks (INoG). In order to be designated, areas need to:

Table 1. Geopark qualification criteria under INoG manifest (est. 1998).

1. have a management plan designed to foster sustainable socio-economic development.
2. demonstrate methods for conserving and enhancing geological heritage and provide means for teaching geo-scientific disciplines and broader environmental issues.
3. have joint proposals submitted by public authorities, local communities and private interests acting together, which demonstrate the best practices with respect to Earth heritage conservation and its integration into sustainable development strategies.

In this sense, the ecomuseum initiative was in tandem with the ultimate goals of the geopark label; to offer a competitive advantage for marketing aligned around the three core objectives of sustainable development; conservation; and collaboration. By fulfilling these roles, the additional advantages of the later geopark designation for areas that falling under the umbrella of national parks administration can be summarized as follows; i) the geopark brand allows a more active role in promotion of regional resources with administrative objectives more firmly targeted at sustainable development; ii) interpretation via guided tours offer a more proactive way of encouraging visitors to interact with the resources, thereby promoting overnight stays and repeat visits; and iii) improved collaboration, with a broader range of stakeholders more actively involved with administration. These three goals will now be analyzed in the geopark framework within which they are embedded.

i) Sustainable development is a vital part of the geopark ideology. Tourism is the single greatest source of jobs in the Toya-Usu area, where 68.5% of the working population are employed in service industries. In 2009, there were an estimated 6.8 million tourists, but this number is in decline due to the prolonged downturn in the domestic tourism market, and a shift in market trends away from coachloads of overnight visitors to individual car tourists. The risks and rewards of tourism are symbolized by Mt. Usu, which is flanked by Showa-Shinzan, a young lava dome created after yet another eruption in 1944. The presence of this highly active volcano poses a threat to the local tourism industry, underlined by the frequent eruptions and by volcanic ash which could impact travel arrangements as in the case of Iceland in 2008. Yet conversely the thrill of visiting a ~~live~~ volcano is an important attraction in the geotourism portfolio, as demonstrated by the large numbers of visitors to Usu, where a ropeway runs up to a viewing platform from where a hiking trail offers easy access to the crater rim. The challenge of nurturing tourism in such a volatile setting ensures that sustainable development is the core aim, occupying a far more unequivocal role than its ambiguous status within the national park.



ii) Proactive conservation. The ultimate aim of geopark designation is to capture a larger share of the economic impact from tourism and funnel it back towards conservation. At the same time, the geopark hopes to offer a more proactive way of encouraging visitors to interact with the resources, including guided programs on geological topics, such as volcanoes and disaster management skills, and natural history, such as the history of Jomon civilizations and indigenous Ainu people. This guided tour system is an important part of geoparks' attempt to interpret the resources for visitors in a way which promotes overnight stays and repeat visits. The geopark agenda thus sees conservation as an important objective within the sustainable development framework, funded by guide employment and geobranding/marketing opportunities that provide a platform for merchandising through holistic use of a logo and graphic design.

iii) Collaboration. The Board members of the Toya Caldera and Usu Volcano Global Geopark Council (hereafter ~~the~~ the Council) are responsible for deciding the composition of management structure, so they have ultimate responsibility for park administration. The extra autonomy allows the Council to include a broader range of stakeholders in the management structure; as well as the Advisory, Scientific, Information and Education Committees, there are designated Committees for Tourism and Citizens associations. This situation is quite distinct from national parks, where the official administration is legally assigned by the MoE from Tokyo.

References

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Credits

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