

Feature Article

Can community-based rural tourism survive under a super-ageing society?: Challenges of an agrarian community in Japan

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Ageing issues in community-based rural tourism

Ageing of society is becoming an issue not only in major industrial countries, but also in developing countries to a lesser extent. Among many countries, Japan has become the first country that entered a super-ageing society in the world (Muramatsu and Akiyama, 2011). When the population of those who are 65 years or older, hereafter 65+, exceed 21 %, it is said that the society becomes a super-ageing society. Ageing issues have various impacts on society, both positively and negatively. In respect to tourism, ageing of society creates various constraints on conventional tourism activity while new markets for matured generations will be emerging. Nevertheless, little has been explored on the connection between ageing and tourism activity except by Ohe (2008). Ohe (2008) pointed out that retired newcomers to rural tourism have significance not only on operators themselves, but also on the local community. Ohe (2012), however, focused on individual operators rather than community-based activity. Thus, this paper considers the challenges that an agrarian community conducting community-based rural tourism faces because ageing of population has greatly progressed in rural Japan. In this respect, ageing issues are unprecedented in no other countries than rural Japan. This is one reason why the author focuses on rural tourism in this country. Another reason that community-based rural tourism is focused on here is that the agrarian community in Japan has been structured based on the local community in life and farm activity. This communal tradition still exists and various policy measures in agriculture have been implemented based on the structure of local community. Thus, it is important to know how community-based rural tourism activity has to be transformed, which enables us to provide an insight to the future evolution of rural tourism not only in Japan, but also in other parts of the world.

In respect to community-based tourism development, social capital is the most commonly taken perspective. Social capital is defined here as a network based on mutual trust among the people concerned. As it is widely known, social capital includes both bonding and bridging types (Gittell and Vidal, 1998; Woolcock and Narayan, 2000; Inaba, 2007; Newton, 2008). Further,

Szreter and Woolcock (2004) added another type of social capital, i.e., “linking social capital”, which is characterized by a vertical network such as relationships between the government and local community. Among these types, a traditional rural community that is based on a closed human network within that community is considered to be a bonding type that aims to strengthen and utilize this network, which is a Coleman’s closed type of network. On the other hand, an open network is considered to be a bridging type (Inaba, 2007; Burt, 2008). In this respect, this paper investigates how an organization of community-based activity, by taking advantage of bonding social capital, deals with ageing issues. As sociologist Fukutake (1980) pointed out, the traditional agrarian community in Japan has functioned based on communal unity and mutual help, which is considered as the community based on bonding social capital.

To approach these aims, first this paper outlines the current ageing situation of Japanese society and farming population. Second, from a case study on the community-based rural tourism activity in Chiba, the researcher reports challenges facing local residents who are involved in this activity. Finally, policy recommendations toward capability building of rural entrepreneurship that can be compatible with ageing population are presented.

Most rapidly ageing society: Japan

Here, the author overviews the ageing situation in Japan. Table 1 shows Japan’s ageing situation in comparison with other countries. The figure is the population percentage of those of 65+ from the year 2000 to 2010 and it is easily recognized that Japan’s figure is the highest among the countries in 2010, which was 23.0 %. Furthermore, the increase in the ageing population in Japan from 2000 to 2010 was the largest 5.8 % despite the smaller percentage of ageing population in 2000 than that of Italy, which was the highest in that year. This fact means that the ageing process in Japan was faster than any other country. The ageing population in Japan has been increasing to 26 % in 2014 and is projected to be 40 % in around 2060 (Cabinet Office, 2015). Thus, one out of four Japanese citizens is elderly these days.

Now, turning to the rural areas, Table 2 shows that the ageing

Table 1: Ratio of ageing population worldwide

Country	Year			Difference 2000/2010
	2000	2005	2010	
Japan	17.2	20.1	23.0	5.8
Italy	18.3	19.6	20.3	2.0
Sweden	17.3	17.3	18.2	0.9
Spain	16.9	16.8	17.1	0.2
Germany	16.3	18.9	20.8	4.5
France	16.0	16.4	16.8	0.8
UK	15.8	16.0	16.6	0.8
USA	12.4	12.3	13.1	0.7
Korea	7.3	9.3	11.1	3.7
China	6.9	7.7	8.4	1.5
Thailand	6.6	7.7	8.9	2.3
India	4.4	4.7	5.1	0.7
More developed regions	14.3	15.3	16.1	1.8
Less developed regions	5.1	5.5	5.8	0.7

Source: United Nations World Population Prospects: The 2012 revision with the exception of data for Japan, which is based on the National Census in Japan.

Note: Developed regions are North America, Japan, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand while developing regions are Africa, Asia excluding Japan, Central and South America, Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia.

Table 2: Ageing of those who are mainly involved in farm activity in Japan

Year	2000	2005	2010	2014
Average age	62.2	64.2	66.1	66.8
% 65+ years old	51.2	57.4	61.1	62.9
No. farmers (thousand)	240	224	205	168

Source: Agricultural and Forestry Census and Survey on Trend of Agricultural Structure, conducted by Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fishery, Japan.

situation of the farming population has progressed much more than the national average. The average age of those who are mainly involved in farm activity was already over 60 in 2000 and over 65 in 2014, which means that farm production is performed by the elderly in general. Due to the progress of ageing, the farming proportion of those 65+ became 62.9 % in 2014, which means nearly two thirds of those farmers are over 65 years old these days. In addition to the ageing population, the farming population has continuously decreased, as shown in the last row of Table 2. Thus, it can be said that rural communities have already experienced the future of the Japanese society in a sense.

Now, let us see what happened in community-based rural tourism from a case study in Chiba.

The case study: Community-based Lodge Kusunoki

The case studied here is located in the city of Minami-boso, the south of Boso Peninsula of Chiba Prefecture. Chiba Prefecture has

two faces; the north west of Chiba is an urbanized and highly industrial area, closer to Metropolitan Tokyo, while the other part of Chiba is a rural and agricultural area. Lodge Kusunoki is in the rural area.

Lodge Kusunoki has two distinctive features in its facility and operation. One is because the facility was renovated from a once abolished municipal elementary school due to progressive ageing and depopulation. The second feature is that its operation is conducted by residents of a traditional rural hamlet named Kamiku. The ageing situation in Kamiku is summarized in Table 3, which shows the ageing process there exceeded the national average in farming population shown in Table 2. The name of the Lodge came from the symbolic tree that is enormous old wild camphor which stands in a small shrine in a corner of the school. The tourism activity was launched as a measure to reutilize the school facility after the abolition. The school, established in 1873, was the symbol of that community due to the long school history and the existence of the sacred tree. Residents in this hamlet have a strong affection for the school as a symbol of community. Hence, it was quite natural for local residents to start discussion about how to utilize the school facility after abolition. Consequently, it was decided, based on consensus among the residents in the community, to use that facility not only as a local community center, but also for rural tourism activity. The facility was renovated by a subsidy from the Ministry of Education that promotes renovation of abolished school facilities for the activities of the local community. Kusunoki has been designated as one of the 50 model cases of renovated school facilities by the Ministry. Operation of the facility was performed by a community-based organization that was newly set up for this purpose in 1997. The head of the autonomous community association, who is rotated annually among the residents, served as the president of this organization. The traditionally formed strong ties among local residents created this style of community-based activity, which shows evidence of bonding social capital.

Structure and activity

Among the one hundred households in this hamlet, 29 residents are employed, including seven married couples, by this organization on a part-time basis, which means that one fourth of the residents are involved in this community-based activity (as of February, 2015). The youngest employee is a 39-year-old female who provides food services and the oldest is a 79-year-old female who cleans the facility. The organization does not have any legal status.

The facility has a kitchen, laboratory for food processing, dining and exhibition room, meeting room, Japanese bath-rooms with large bath tubs, and six Japanese style rooms with tatami covered floors and futon sleeping mats for lodging. A maximum of 48 people can stay in the six rooms. The former gymnasium is used as a multi-purpose hall.

Daily activities of the 29 residents, i.e., 11 males and 27 females, hired on a part-time basis are divided into four units: administration, food service, purchase of goods, and cleaning/environment. Among the 29 part-time employees is a manager

Table 3: Ratio of ageing population in Kamiku hamlet, Minami-boso

Year	Total no. households	No. farm households	Population ageing rate (%)	
			Farming population	Agricultural workforce
1990	110	72	24.9	33.3
1995	–	64	29.6	45.2
2000	105	51	37.7	70.3
2005	–	35	41.5	77.4
2010	108	28	41.8	86.8

Source: Agricultural Hamlet Card, MAFF.

Note: Only those who sell farm products are counted as farm households.

who oversees all four units. A General Assembly chaired by the President of the Kusunoki is held once a year together with that of the community association to approve the budget, board members, and setting or changing of rules. Thus, a decision-making system comprised of various entities is adopted to harmonize activity of the Kusunoki with consensus in the hamlet. This system enables community residents to learn about the hamlet tourism activity and also to offer their opinion regarding that activity although it takes a longer time to make decisions than in a private company.

The services that the Kusunoki provides are accommodation, meals, and farm experience services. The accommodation fee is 5500 yen per night including breakfast, dinner, and taxes regardless of the season. Experience services are provided when more than 10 people come with reservations. The total sales revenue in 2013 was 28 million yen (236.3 thousand US dollars, 118.5 yen/dollar) in which 45% was from accommodations and 55% from food service and experience programs. The contracted subsidy from the municipality was 4.7 million yen (39.7 thousand US dollars). Regarding the cost structure, labour costs accounted for the largest share at 13.6 million yen with 7.8 million for foodstuffs, 3.3 million for utilities, 7 million for administration costs, 0.5 million for purchased goods, and 0.3 million for materials used in the experience program, all of which totaled 32.5 million yen (274.3 thousand US dollars). From these figures, it can be understood that the subsidy plays an important role in providing equilibrium between revenue and costs.

Figure 1 shows the number of visitors during the past eight years. The fiscal year, as shown in the figure, begins in April and ends in March of the following year. The peak season is July and August when group visitors, mainly youth clubs such as baseball clubs and Boy Scouts, are the most numerous. In other seasons, family visitors and groups of visitors come on weekends, the year-end, and New Year holidays. Visitors are almost all domestic tourists, and tourists from abroad are rare. Repeating visitors account for around 60%. The breakdown of where visitors came from is as follows: 54% from Chiba Prefecture, 24% from the neighbouring Kanto area, and 22% from other areas, including 600 children from Fukushima in 2013. As mentioned later in detail, the total number of visitors is over 10 thousand, including those who stay overnight and

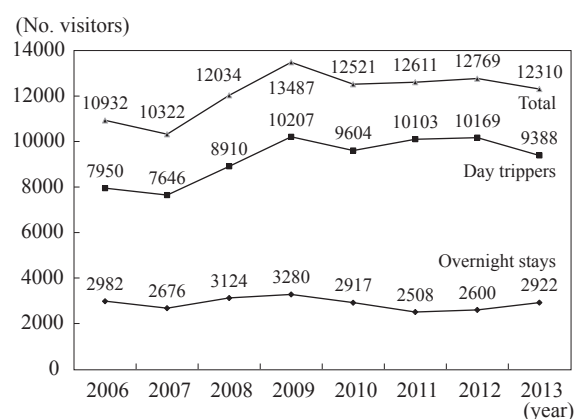


Figure 1: Annual trend of number of Visitors to the Kusunoki (2006-2013)

Source: Data were provided by the Kusunoki.

day trippers, that is, those who engage in experience services, take baths, and have meetings. The Kusunoki does not engage in public relations (PR) activity except for their own website and a link to the website of the local municipality; therefore, word of mouth by visitors is the most frequent means of PR.

Consequently, through these activities, those people who are involved in operating the Kusunoki gain not only jobs and income, but also self-confidence and local pride. Thus far they are satisfied with what they are doing, which results in strengthening the bonding social capital in the community while maintaining the linking social capital with the municipality.

Challenge: Succession, cohesive decision-making, and PR through social media

As mentioned above, the Kusunoki generates jobs and revenue in an ageing rural community by also playing a role as a community center that symbolizes communal bonding. Nevertheless, the Kusunoki has several issues for future evolution, although the employees who work there are satisfied with what they do. The first challenge is to secure successors. The same staff has been involved since the inauguration of the Kusunoki, so they are becoming old. It is necessary to have a smooth transition to the younger generation. Those who are in their 30s living in the hamlet, however, have stable jobs already and work

outside of the hamlet. Even if they decide to work for the Kusunoki, the present price level for accommodations is not high enough to earn revenue sufficient to pay for full-time employment of a young staff. If the accommodation price increases, the number of visitors will decrease unless attractive new services are offered. There could be an option to form an NPO (non-profit organization) or a community-based private company. People in the Kusunoki, however, are not sufficiently self-confident about their own entrepreneurship to start a new business evolution. Another reason for this reserved attitude toward a business evolution is that they respect the principle of community consensus making. They are still skeptical about the decision-making ways of NPOs or private companies because these decision-making ways will not be compatible with the consensus-oriented community principle. If an NPO or private company is set up, then quick decisions are necessary, which is different from what they are now doing in the community. Another point is that these entities are not always compatible with the community-based subsidy principle urged by the municipality. This is a dilemma that the Kusunoki people face between the community-based principle and further development of tourism activity. How to promote the entry of newcomers into the community is a common topic emerging for every rural community.

The third challenge is the issue of PR activity, which does not need immediate action, but will become crucial in the long run. Kusunoki does not practice PR activity except for their own website and a link to the website of the local municipality, so that word of mouth by visitors is the most frequent means of PR. A PR activity that is oriented toward social media will be necessary in the future; therefore, the younger generation, which is good at dealing with social media, should be recruited for any form of involvement.

Consequently, it should be noted that community-based tourism activity of the Kusunoki will reach a turning point with the progression of ageing among the people concerned. In any case, capability building, especially targeting the younger generation in the area of SNS marketing and language skills in English, to cope with potential inbound demand is necessary. Raising rural entrepreneurship compatible with the community-based mind is the challenge ahead for this community. This challenge is common to all rural areas. It should be noted that ageing of bonding social capital places limitations on its capability to cope with these aspects of entrepreneurship and networking with external human resources.

Conclusion

This paper investigated a community-based rural tourism in Chiba under super-ageing society in Japan. The case study revealed the fact that the ageing bonding social capital is not sufficiently effective in coping with newly evolving circumstances under conditions of an ageing population. Thus, since bonding social capital becomes old along with the ageing of the community, it is time for those people involved in the Kusunoki who have developed social capital solely based on a network within the local

community to expand the network to outside of the community, i.e. bridging social capital. This would enable them to mobilize external resources while keeping the advantages of bonding social capital. It is also true, however, that it is often difficult for local people to expand the network beyond the local community. Therefore, it is necessary to provide support measures to facilitate the development of an open network, especially focusing on capacity building in terms of rural entrepreneurship targeting on younger generations in collaboration with external technical experts.

In this respect, how to effectively expand the network from bonding social capital to including those outside of the community and how to make a smooth transition from the present participants to the younger generation should be scrutinized in future studies.

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