

Preface

Imbalance between surging inbound tourism and rural tourism

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In the post-COVID-19 era, inbound tourism to Japan has recovered rapidly, reaching a record high in the number of arrivals in 2024. This upward trend is expected to continue, fueled by events such as the Osaka World Expo 2025, and anticipated economic contributions to GDP. However, the benefits of this recovery have not been evenly distributed across the country, instead being concentrated in specific areas. Major tourist cities such as Tokyo, Kyoto, and Osaka are poised to reap significant advantages, while rural regions are less likely to benefit from this growth—apart from well-known ski destinations in Hokkaido and Nagano.

In the realm of rural tourism, which is my area of expertise, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries, Japan has established a new policy target for the fiscal year 2025. This target aims for seven million rural tourism stays, with 10 % of these involving inbound tourists. This equates to 70,000 inbound stays within the rebranded “*nohaku*,” i.e., countryside/farm stay, rural tourism initiative. While I anticipate that the overall target of seven million stays will be achieved, attaining the 10 % inbound share presents a more challenging—but ultimately achievable—goal. My optimism stems from the fact that a certain segment of international tourists actively seeks unique experiences unavailable in urban tourism. These travelers are often particularly drawn to outdoor activities and rural heritage, and more likely to look at rural areas as next destinations.

To achieve this, we must conduct empirical research to better understand the preferences and demographic profiles of tourists visiting rural areas—a topic that remains largely unexplored in the context of rural tourism in Japan. Our research on international tourists indicates that as popular tourist sites become more crowded, travelers increasingly seek out rural areas for a more comfortable and less congested travel experience.

Another promising area for inbound tourism is food and drink, especially given the designation of Japanese cuisine as an intangible cultural heritage in 2012 and traditional *sake* brewing in 2024. These recognitions have further elevated the popularity of Japanese food and *sake*, solidifying Japan’s reputation for its rich culinary heritage. Therefore, we must carefully analyze the

preferences of international tourists regarding tourism practices in rural areas. Additionally, it is crucial to explore effective online marketing strategies to fully unlock the potential of rural tourism.

As a lifestyle-based business, rural tourism provides operators with a unique opportunity to showcase the joy and fulfillment they experience in rural and farm life. This intangible sense of satisfaction is a fundamental value of rural tourism, encouraging international visitors to return. However, its significance as an attraction has not received sufficient attention.

In Italy, agritourism operators share their way of life with guests from both urban areas within the country and international destinations. In addition to offering accommodation and culinary services, they sell farm products directly to visitors—an increasingly important source of income. From my perspective, guests who witness the operators’ joy and satisfaction—something rarely experienced in urban life—gain insight into the meaningful way of living in rural areas. This connection serves as a powerful draw, encouraging them to return, much like an irresistible magnet.

I believe this essential aspect of rural tourism has a dual benefit—not only enriching guests’ experiences but also inspiring younger generations, including farm successors and newcomers from outside rural communities. This dimension deserves further scrutiny in future studies.

About the author

Yasuo Ohe is a Visiting Professor at Tokyo University of Agriculture. He is currently the President of the Japan Academic Society of Tourism.

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