Articles

Community-Based Tourism: A Pathway to Sustainability for Japan’s Protected Areas

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The recent diversification of domestic tourism needs in Japan, seen particularly in increasing demand for ecotourism and green tourism, shows that there is much potential for further development of nature tourism, much of which takes place in protected areas. However, numerous challenges exist. Based on case-study research on tourism taking place in three national parks, four common success factors of these sites were identified, namely, institutional arrangements; self-regulations related to conservation; high environmental awareness; and the existence of partnerships. This article demonstrates how, under the current system of Japanese national park management, community-based tourism can be facilitated by building upon these success factors. This would address the existing challenges to tourism in protected areas, and in turn would significantly contribute to the sustainable management of protected areas. Finally, this article points to the need for future research that focuses on the wider applicability of the lessons learned from the Japanese experience.

Keywords community-based tourism, Japan, national park management, participation, partnerships, protected areas

Tourism, travel, and other recreational and leisure activities are undertaken by vast numbers of people in Japan. In 2004, the Japanese population as a whole engaged in domestic overnight travel 255 million times, which amounts to twice per year per person. The average Japanese takes 1.5 overnight domestic trips for tourism purposes and spends approximately 47,000 Japanese yen (392 USD; 1 USD = 120 JPY) per year on domestic overnight travel (MLIT 2005). The general trend since the early 1990s is a decline in numbers of domestic Japanese tourists. At the same time, however, recent trends in domestic tourism demonstrate that there is a growing tendency...
for people to travel farther away and in much smaller groups than before. A diversification of tourism needs, seen particularly in the increasing demand for nature tourism experiences such as ecotourism and green tourism, has also been noted (MLIT 2001). Nature-based recreational activities in protected areas include nature viewing from vehicles (cars, tourism buses, cable cars, boats), hot-spring bathing, day camping/car camping, hiking, rock climbing, skiing, and stream climbing. River- or ocean-based activities such as scuba diving, snorkeling, canoeing, whale watching, and dolphin swimming are also becoming popular. It is estimated that nearly 917 million people visited natural parks in 2003 (MLIT 2005), of whom a little under 30% are visitors to national parks. Despite such significant numbers, specific policies and laws that comprehensively deal with tourism in protected areas are lacking.

This study is based on research on nature tourism in protected areas in Japan conducted between April 2002 and March 2004. First, based on a review of nature tourism activities in Japanese protected areas, this article gives an overview of the challenges that exist in nature tourism currently taking place. Next, based on case studies of three popular nature tourism destinations, the common factors that make these sites more successful than others are identified. The article then analyzes the case-study sites in the context of community-based tourism and demonstrates how, by building upon these success factors, facilitating community-based tourism would significantly contribute to the sustainable management of protected areas. Building upon previous work on tourism in parks and protected areas of Japan (Hiwasaki 2003), this study contributes to the growing worldwide literature on the sustainable development of nature tourism, ecotourism in particular. At the same time, this article attempts to fill a gap in the literature of protected area management in Japan, especially that pertaining to the use of protected areas for tourism, since little has yet been written in the English language on the topic.

**Background**

**Overview and Trends of Park Tourism in Japan**

The Natural Parks system, consisting of national, quasi-national, and prefectural natural parks, is the most renowned and extensive system of conserving nature in Japan. Designated as “natural areas of outstanding scenic beauty” under the Natural Parks Law of 1957 (MoE 2001, 16), natural parks are managed by the Ministry of Environment (MoE). There are currently 28 national parks, 55 quasi-national parks, and over 300 prefectural natural parks that together cover approximately 14% of the country’s total land area.

The Japanese system of natural park management is called chiiki-sei, commonly translated as “park management by zoning and regulation” or “multiple-use parks.” The system is unique in that land is not “set aside” for nature conservation. Rather, areas were designated as park wherever the need to preserve “scenic beauty” was recognized, regardless of land ownership or land use, and they are managed by imposing regulations on land use and development. The numerous challenges that such a system of managing parks harbors are discussed next, in terms of their relevance to challenges facing tourism in Japan’s protected areas.

Because the initial objectives of parks were to preserve “scenic beauty,” early parks were designated for recreational uses—such as hot-spring bathing—while natural areas, such as mountains and forests with high biodiversity, were not designated
until later (Hatakeyama 2001). Trips to *onsen*—hot-spring baths—are one of the earliest forms of tourism in Japanese protected areas. According to the Japan Onsen Association, the use of *onsen* by the Japanese general public for recreation and treatment purposes dates back to the Edo Period (17th–19th centuries). The first national parks to be designated—eight in 1934 and four in 1936—all had *onsen* resorts within or close to park boundaries. According to information provided in the Japan Integrated Biodiversity Information System, of the 17 parks designated before 1954, 13 have hot-spring bathing as one of their primary use purposes. It is also worth noting that both *onsen* and natural parks are managed by the Nature Conservation Bureau of the MoE.

Hot-spring bathing remains an extremely popular form of tourism activity in protected areas. Results of a survey show that for 8 consecutive years, the most popular activity undertaken by domestic overnight travelers in Japan was *onsen* bathing (Japan Tourism Association 2004). While acknowledging the importance of *onsen* as one of the primary activities undertaken in protected areas, the case-study sites in this research were sites connected primarily with nature-based tourism activities more synonymous with ecotourism and adventure tourism, for reasons explained later regarding the criteria for selecting case-study sites.

**Community-Based Tourism**

In recent years, the concept of community-based tourism as a tool for both conservation and development has been increasingly recognized by government, business, private, and community sectors (Jain and Triraganon 2003), in particular in the context of development assistance. The emergence of community-based tourism can be placed in the context of two developments: one, recent worldwide activities that promote sustainable and responsible forms of tourism; and two, the emergence of alternative approaches to protected area management and conservation efforts that link biodiversity conservation with local community development.

Community-based tourism is defined in this article by its four objectives; (1) *empowerment and ownership*: increasing local community empowerment and ownership through participation in the planning and management of tourism in protected areas; (2) *conservation of resources*: having a positive impact on conservation of natural and/or cultural resources in and around protected areas through tourism; (3) *social and economic development*: enhancing or maintaining economic and social activities in and around a protected area, with substantial benefits—economic and social—to the local community; and (4) *quality visitor experience*: ensuring that visitor experience is of high quality and is socially and environmentally responsible.

**Case-Study Sites**

Three sites—Ogasawara Islands, Ogasawara National Park; Yakushima Island, Kirishima-Yaku National Park; and Oze Special Protection Zone, Nikko National Park—were selected for this research (Figure 1). Only brief descriptions of the sites are provided in this section; further details can be found later in the analysis and discussion sections.

Small-scale nature-based tourism in protected areas first began in Japan in the Ogasawara Islands—renowned for their unique and pristine natural environment—when whale watching was officially taken up as a development scheme for the
islands in 1989. They are located 1000 km south of Tokyo; to get there takes 25 hours via a ferry from Tokyo that runs once every 6 days. The islands were repatriated to Japan in 1968 and designated as a national park in 1972 and a wilderness area in 1975. Oze Special Protection Zone of the vast Nikko National Park, which has a long history as a nature-based tourism site, is most well known for its appearance in the hit song “Memories of Summer,” which set off a tourism boom in the mid-1950s. In this protected area in mainland Honshu—designated as a special protection zone in 1953 following the designation of Nikko National Park in 1934—tourism in Oze represents the kind of mass nature-based tourism that takes place in many protected areas in Japan. Yakushima Island, located off the coast of Kagoshima in southern Kyushu, is a prime ecotourism destination, well known for its forests of ancient Yaku-sugi (Japanese cedar trees over 1000 years old). Yakushima is where the word “ecotourism” was first used in Japan, when ecotourism development was proposed as a new community industry alternative to mass tourism in 1992. Parts of the island are designated as a national park and a wilderness area, but the island is renowned for its inscription on UNESCO’s World Heritage List as a natural property.

Methodology

To begin this study, reviews of nature tourism activities in Japan’s protected areas were conducted. Initial data collection was based on reviews of literature, policies, and institutional arrangements pertaining to tourism in protected areas; personal communication with some stakeholders; and case-study presentations at ecotourism conferences in Japan. Based on this review, challenges facing nature tourism in Japan’s protected areas were identified.

Then three sites were selected for in-depth study, based on a combination of both tourism- and conservation-related criteria. The tourism-related factors included
the amount of social and economic development in and around the protected area as a result of tourism; trends indicating recent increases in the popularity and/or diversification of tourism in the destinations concerned; the existence of nature tourism activities by local communities that could be considered sustainable; measures taken by government authorities toward promoting sustainable tourism; and the promotion of tourism products based on the sustainable use of local natural and cultural resources. Factors related to conservation and protected area management, such as the level of environmental awareness of local people and other stakeholders, and implementation of conservation activities, were also considered.

Data were collected during field research at the three case-study sites through participant observation and key informant interviews covering a range of stakeholders. At all sites, the initial key informants were government officials at the national and local levels (staff of the MoE, Forestry Agency, prefectural and local governments) and prominent members of the private sector involved with tourism, protected area management, and conservation, who had actively participated in conferences on ecotourism and/or conservation. Using “snowball” sampling, additional informants were identified and included local people who were involved with tourism, conservation, and community development issues, as well as landowners with a stake in the management of the protected area and tourism. Over 20 semistructured interviews were conducted at each site.

The analytical framework used in analyzing the case studies consisted of the following: (1) sites and lessons learned: looking at each site and examining whether and in what ways the four community-based tourism objectives have been successfully or unsuccessfully achieved; (2) SWOT analysis of four community-based tourism objectives: analyzing the strengths and weaknesses and the opportunities and threats; (3) relative importance of policy instruments in sites: analyzing contributions of policy instruments to the success of each site; and (4) comparison of policy instruments and their impacts against the community-based tourism objectives: examining the role of each policy instrument in contributing to the achievement of the four community-based tourism objectives. Through this analysis of the data collected, the common factors underlying the success of the sites were identified.

Before continuing, one of the limitations to this study should be noted here, one that arises from the fact that the primary focus of this study has been to extract lessons that can be learned from “good practices.” The analysis and conclusions are drawn only from strength factors of sites that were considered successful. This does in no way imply that these sites do not face many, if not all, of the challenges facing nature tourism in Japan, such as those discussed in the next section. Although the numerous challenges that these sites face can be important in extracting lessons and in formulating policies, such challenges are not the focus of this article.

Challenges Facing Nature Tourism in Japan’s Protected Areas

Nine challenges facing nature tourism in protected areas are described in this section. Five challenges relate to general conservation issues arising from the system of national park management in Japan, while four are more specific to tourism.

One of the biggest challenges of tourism in protected areas is dealing with the problem of overuse. Tourism in Japan is characterized by high concentrations of tourists at certain times of the year—most notably weekends, national holidays, the “Golden Week,”4 and summer vacation period—to certain natural attractions,
with a predominant number of day trips. For example, figures show that of the six entry points to Oze, approximately half of all visitors to Oze use the one that requires the shortest hike to the wetland for which Oze is famous. Approximately 20% of all visits take place on the 10 most crowded days—on weekends or national holidays in early June, mid to late July, and early October—which fall in prime seasons for viewing *mizubasho* (Japanese skunk cabbage), *nikkokisuge* (broad dwarf day lily), and the tinted colors of leaves in autumn, respectively (Oze Preservation Foundation 1998). Only about a quarter of the visitors stay overnight in the area, according to figures provided by the MoE in 2002. Large visitor numbers are blamed as the causes of environmental problems such as the erosion of hiking trails, destruction of vegetation due to trampling, introduction of foreign plant species, problems related to waste disposal and water pollution due to inadequate toilet and sewerage facilities, and emissions from automobiles.

In many tourism attractions, the “traffic jam”—not only of cars, but of people, who must queue for turns to see a certain nature tourism attraction or to use toilet facilities—is an aspect of overuse that leads to the deterioration of the quality of the nature experience (Kato 1998). Overuse results from a combination of factors, the biggest of which is the lack of mechanisms to effectively regulate use (NACS-J 2000). Although the need to control, or regulate, the number of tourists who enter a protected area has been recognized, this has been difficult to implement. Easy access—the well-developed transportation system and web of roads constructed within park boundaries—makes it virtually impossible to restrict visitor numbers, although attempts have been made in certain areas to limit the entry of privately owned vehicles. For example, Oze was one of the first protected areas in Japan to do so, starting in 1974; in 2003, such regulations were also implemented on 23 main roads in 15 national parks, for periods ranging from 2 days during the most popular seasons to every day of the year (MoE 2004). However, the fact that most of the parkland in mainland Honshu is privately or publicly owned makes regulation difficult and fee collection impossible. The designation of utilization regulation zones, made possible by the amendments to the Natural Parks Law in 2002, may hold one of the keys to solving this problem in the future.  

A second challenge, closely related to the problem of overuse, is that the system of national park management is conducive to large-scale tourism development. As specified in the first two articles of the Natural Parks Law, the purpose of parks is to protect places of natural scenic beauty while simultaneously promoting their public health, recreational, and educational uses. With such objectives, measures to facilitate park use are abundant. Although the Park Plan established by the management authority of each park distinguishes a range of zones with different degrees of protection—namely, Special Zones (further broken down into Special Protection Zones, Class I, Class II, and Class III Special Zones) and Ordinary Zones—permission to use and develop such zones, especially in the ordinary zones, is easily obtained. In the 1960s and 1970s, there was an explosion of large-scale tourism infrastructure development within natural park boundaries, such as tourism tollways built in order for tourists to enjoy the scenery and cable-car facilities constructed to transport them to mountaintops for panoramic views. This was followed by more construction projects, although smaller in scale, such as resort hotels to accommodate package tourists arriving in large tour buses and ski resorts and golf courses for them to enjoy recreational activities in natural settings. The Law for the Development of Comprehensive Resort Areas enacted in 1987 was the last straw, which
made it possible for regulations and zoning to be changed in order to enable private-sector investment to build tourist attractions such as ski resorts, golf courses, museums, zoos and accommodation facilities within park boundaries (Hatakeyama 2001). Urabandai area in Bandai-Asahi National Park, where five ski resorts were constructed following the enactment of this law, is claimed to be the most heavily damaged by the effects of this law (Kato 2000).

The third main challenge is that park management and nature conservation are top-down, leaving little room for community participation. Fundamental principles and plans related to conservation are formulated by the central government. Local people, who have been typically pro-development, have traditionally been excluded from park management. Participation was not recognized as important by the Japanese government until very recently and there are currently no formal opportunities under the existing legal framework that guarantee the incorporation of the voices and opinions of all stakeholders in the decision-making process. Submitting opinions, attending public meetings, and making inquiries to the Central Environment Council are currently the main avenues for the public to participate. Unfortunately, these procedures are mere formalities, and public opinions are rarely reflected in final decision-making. Furthermore, measures regarding environmental rights, people’s participation, and information disclosure, which are covered under laws such as the Basic Environment Law (1993) and the Environmental Impact Assessment Law (1997), have been criticized as insufficient (Hatakeyama 2001). The Law for the Promotion of Nature Restoration (2002), considered to have made an important stride toward a bottom-up approach to nature conservation (NPAJ 2004), has yet to yield positive outcomes (Sekine and Yoshida 2003). Public demands for increased participation in the decision-making process are becoming evident in various campaigns launched by local residents and in the lobbying done by environmental nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

The fourth challenge is the notable lack of human and financial resources allocated for appropriate park management. The annual budget allocated to the Nature Conservation Bureau of the MoE for park management in 2003 was 18.6 billion JPY (155 million USD), of which more than three-quarters was dedicated to public works projects related to nature revitalization and maintenance of facilities (NPAJ 2004). Meanwhile, the total number of MoE staff assigned to Nature Conservation Offices country wide in 2003 was 223. Although the annual budget has more than tripled since 1985 and the number of park rangers has increased drastically in the past 10 years—nearly doubling since 1991—this can hardly be said to be sufficient (NPAJ 2004). Interviews with park rangers show their frustrations with the fact that most of their hours are spent at their desks, occupied with permit-related work; they are unable to undertake activities in the field such as patrolling (Kato 2000). In addition, park rangers are trained only in landscape architecture or forestry. Consequently, they are not equipped to manage tourism use of parks, nor are they trained in participatory approaches to park management.

The fifth challenge, lack of coordination among the different government stakeholders, is typical of the vertically divided Japanese administration system, where there is little communication between agencies. Lack of coordination leads not only to redundancy but can hinder comprehensive management of natural resources in ecologically fragile areas. A poignant example is Yakushima Island. Approximately 20% of this 50,000-hectare island was inscribed on UNESCO’s World Heritage List as a natural property in 1993. Overlapping parts of the island have also been
designated as MoE-managed national park and wilderness areas, Forestry Agency-managed forest ecosystems reserve, and Agency for Cultural Affairs-managed special natural monument. The national park area is also a biosphere reserve under UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Programme, under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. The management of these various protected areas is uncoordinated, leading the various government stakeholders to frequently obstruct and criticize each other and to deny each other’s rights (Kato 2000). As a result, Yakushima lacks a comprehensive environmental conservation plan, despite its many protected area designations.

In addition to such challenges related to general conservation issues arising from the system of national park management in Japan, the following four challenges are those that are more specific to tourism. The sixth challenge is that the demand for tourism in protected areas is diversifying. Although figures show that the number of visitors to protected areas has been gradually decreasing since it peaked in 1992, the kinds of activities that take place are diversifying and pose new threats to ecologically fragile areas. Environmentally destructive as they were, once built, large-scale tourism infrastructures absorbed much of the negative impact of tourism (though excluding emissions from automobiles). Activities such as nature viewing from vehicles such as cars, tourism buses, and cable cars are still popular, while the number of visitors to ski resorts located within protected area boundaries has decreased tremendously since the early 1990s (NPAJ 2004). Activities that take place in previously unventured places are increasing, due to the popularity of adventure tourism such as rock climbing and stream climbing. Moreover, mountain hiking is an activity that drastically increased in popularity all over Japan in the 1990s, mostly among the middle-aged, a trend that is attributed to the “one-hundred mountains boom.”

Thus, currently, the predicament facing most national parks is no longer just a matter of balancing conservation with recreational use, but also of how to appropriately meet the diversifying demands of visitors.

The seventh challenge is that nature tourism development in Japan has been primarily led by the private and nonprofit sectors. The Ogasawara Whale-watching Association (OWA), established in 1989, is recognized as the first ecotourism-related organization in Japan. Other initiatives by civil society groups include the ecotourism guidelines formulated by the Nature Conservation Society of Japan (NACS-J)—a national environmental NGO—in 1994, and other guidelines that have been formulated at the local level in Hokkaido, Ogasawara, Iriomote, and Okinawa’s Yombaru Region (Maita 2002; Ono 2002; Sayama and Nishida 2000). Japan’s first Ecotourism Society was established on Iriomote Island in 1996, followed by the founding of the Japan Ecotourism Society in 1998 by major tour companies, scholars, and tour operators. Other local-level ecotourism organizations have subsequently been established, including in Hokkaido, Gifu, and Fukushima prefectures and other villages in Okinawa (MoE 2002a; Maita 2002). In the private sector, Yakushima Nature Activity Center (YNAC), generally recognized as the first tour operator to offer guided ecotours in Japan, was established in 1993. Other organizations followed, while mainstream tour companies began to see the market potential of ecotourism.

Government agencies such as the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport (MLIT), the Forestry Agency, and the MoE are all responsible for providing policies and institutional support for tourism in protected areas; however, it is only recently that governments have begun to work toward providing substantial support. Support has so far been focused on promoting ecotours, in particular
introducing guide and interpreter training, and considering accreditation programs, in order to respond to nongovernment sector-led ecotourism development. The MLIT, the ministry responsible for recreation and tourism, has supported the training of nature interpretation guides, and recently produced a manual on using nature guides to promote community development (MLIT 2004). Three of the five measures undertaken by the Ecotourism Promotion Council, as a result of a series of meetings chaired by the Minister of the Environment during 2003 and 2004, were related to ecotour promotion: first, disseminating information on ecotours; second, giving best practice awards for ecotours and other services offered; and third, publishing a manual to promote ecotourism, a large section of which was devoted to developing and marketing guided tours.

The eighth challenge relates to the gap that exists within communities in and around a protected area with regard to levels of interest and involvement in tourism and thus benefits received from tourism. An overwhelming majority of those who offer nature tours in and around protected areas of Japan are people from outside the area (called “I-turns,” representing a pun on the straight-line path of outsiders to the local area) or natives who have returned after spending time outside (called “U-turns”). I-turns and U-turns are promoted nationally by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare as a policy to foster rural employment, and by local governments hoping to secure human resources to revitalize rural and agricultural areas and deal with problems of population decrease. In terms of nature-based tourism development, I-turns can be viewed as a positive force in that they are usually responsible for spearheading nature conservation and nature tourism movements in rural areas that have traditionally been prodevelopment. Moreover, in some conservative rural areas, it is difficult for newcomers to find employment in the primary sector of industry such as agriculture, fishing, and forestry, leaving them with no choice but to engage in the service sector such as nature tourism. Thus, a large percentage of those involved with nature tourism guiding in popular ecotourism destinations such as Ogasawara, Yakushima, and Iriomote are I- or U-turns. However, the perceptions of local people who are not directly involved with tourism is that ecotour guides are the most well off residents, earning substantial income by “selling nature.” Profits from tourism remain strictly in the hands of those directly involved, while all residents share in the negative social impacts of tourism, such as increases in garbage and cars (and thus, traffic congestion and automobile accidents). This results in jealousy and alienation of those not directly involved with tourism from tourism activities taking place in and around the protected areas where they live, making it difficult for them to understand the potential that tourism holds to contribute to community development.

The last challenge is that with the sudden increase in demand for ecotourism in certain parks and the corresponding proliferation of guides, one of the biggest causes for visitor dissatisfaction is the low quality of guides—who have been criticized for not making efforts to offer high-quality interpretation although they charge high fees. An interviewee in Yakushima noted that the primary complaints received by the tourism association concern the high price and poor quality of ecotours. The fact that guides are frequently recent migrants to an area often results in their lack of knowledge of the area, making it difficult for them to provide in-depth information on local culture and environmental practices to tourists. Even if a guide is knowledgeable, he or she is often not trained in the appropriate skills to provide information in an engaging manner. Safety is also an important issue, particularly
in nature tourism activities that verge on adventure tourism. Recently, accidents resulting in the deaths of tourists on guided nature tours have been highlighted by the media, leading to heightened concerns about safety. Consequently, governments at both national and prefectural levels are increasingly focusing attention on introducing standardization, accreditation, and/or training programs for interpreters and guides, in order to raise the quality of guides.

Success Factors
Aside from their magnificent natural amenities that provide high levels of visitor satisfaction, Ogasawara, Oze, and Yakushima share four factors that make them highly successful as park tourism sites: arrangements that strengthen institutions; conservation-related self-regulations; high levels of environmental awareness in the local community; and the existence of strong partnerships. The fact that these common strength factors are drawn across the sites does not imply that the sites are all the same. The prominence of each of the strength factors varies across the three sites, the quality and the quantity of tourists and the kind of nature tourism that takes place differ substantially, and the socioeconomic, geographic, and natural characteristics are in no way homogeneous. The common factors are drawn and are analyzed here because of the role they have played in enabling Ogasawara, Oze, and Yakushima to deal more successfully with the challenges that face nature tourism destinations in Japan.

All three sites feature arrangements that strengthen institutions, namely, arrangements that effectively facilitate the coordinated involvement of a wide range of community actors and stakeholders in institutions related to conservation and/or nature tourism. The Oze Preservation Foundation, set up in 1995, has been successful in bringing a diverse range of government stakeholders—namely, three prefectural governments and three local villages under whose jurisdiction Oze falls—together with private-sector businesses and local people. The foundation is the first such local-level and nongovernmental organization ever established to manage a protected area, and it acts as a coordinator and intermediary among the various stakeholders for the sustainable conservation and use of Oze. By acting as a vehicle through which stakeholders can become actively involved in national park management, the Oze Preservation Foundation has played an important role in putting all stakeholders on the same ground and reducing the overwhelming power of government stakeholders, while at the same time trying to incorporate the opinions of locals and NGOs.

Effective institutions to deal with ecotourism have also been established in Yakushima and Ogasawara. The Ecotourism Support Council established in 2002 by the Yakushima Environment and Culture Foundation (YECF) is chaired by a local environmental activist/nature guide and is composed of representatives from the MoE, the Forestry Agency, the two local authorities, farmers’ and fishermen’s cooperatives, and the tourism association, hotel association, guides association, chambers of commerce and industry, and a private enterprise. In 2003, after a series of meetings, the council produced guidelines to promote ecotourism in Yakushima, and presented a proposal to introduce a system of collecting fees from tourists to be directed towards environmental conservation (YESC 2003). The Bonin Ecotourism Commission—composed of the local authority, the society of commerce and industry, tourism associations, and OWA—has, after 2 years of discussions, established a master plan for developing sustainable tourism in Ogasawara. The plan includes introduction of rules and the implementation of activities related to both conservation and use.
Self-regulations, namely, voluntary rules created by nongovernment sectors, or nonlegally binding rules put forth by government agencies, have significantly contributed to conservation behavior and raised the awareness of both local people and tourists in all three sites. The voluntary whale-watching guidelines established by OWA have been very effective in deterring unrestricted behavior and have proven to be an important tool for promoting sustainable whale watching. The rules, originally established by whale-watching experts, have now been revised in consultation with local guides, to more appropriately reflect the situation in Ogasawara. Adherence to such voluntary rules by guides has also resulted in increased tourist awareness, which in turn has increased the quality of visitor experience. Yakushima’s voluntary Forest Maintenance Cooperation Fees, collected from visitors at two of the most popular nature tourism attractions on the island located in Natural Forests for Recreation, are directed toward maintenance of the forest, nature trails, facilities, and cleanup, as well as covering personnel expenses and other administrative costs for managing the sites.

In Oze, the use of private vehicles is regulated at certain times of the year. Although not voluntary, this regulation is nonetheless significant in that the local communities were fully involved in its inception. The MoE works together with the prefectural governments and the communities in implementing this regulation, with cooperation from the local authorities and the Oze Preservation Foundation. Because local transportation companies provide shuttle services to park entry points, these regulations have resulted in substantial economic benefits to the local community, in addition to decreasing the number of cars.

The environmental awareness of certain members of the local community is extremely high in all three sites. For example, the man who became well known for his instrumental role in putting a stop to plans to construct a tourist road beside the lake of Oze-numa in 1971—working directly through the then-newly established Environment Agency—was an Oze accommodation facility owner. His grandfather opened the first mountain hut in Oze in 1910, and his family had been involved with nature conservation of the area for three generations.

In Yakushima and Oze, numerous awareness-raising and capacity-building programs have been implemented that have resulted in conservation activities as well as sustainable tourism practices, such as adherence to voluntary rules. The extent of capacity-building training provided to community members in these two sites is quite significant, particularly in Ogasawara, where various organizations have provided such programs. In 1998, OWA began offering whale-watching guide training courses, which evolved into a set of whale-watching interpreter certification courses. About 170 locals have now received this community-based training. In 1994 NACS-J offered nature-guide training, resulting in the establishment of a nature-guide network the following year. There are close to 80 guides who have received such field-based training. In 2002, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government began implementing certification training for interpretation, guiding, and monitoring, and approximately 140 people have received this training. In Yakushima, the YECF has been providing various awareness-raising programs in the form of nature tours for locals, environmental education seminars for local civil servants, and seminars on various nature topics, mostly for guides. In 2004, the foundation began implementing a series of study sessions for nature guides, with the involvement of the local tourism association and the Japanese Red Cross Society. In both Ogasawara and Yakushima, nature guides and others who have received training are the primary people involved with volunteer cleanups and other conservation activities in protected areas.
Finally, in all three sites, strong partnerships had created—or serious attempts were being made to forge partnerships to create—collaborative relationships among stakeholders such as the government, NGOs, the private sector, and local people. The partnerships forged among the many stakeholders in Oze Special Protection Zone are evident from the fact that participants of the annual Oze Summit—inaugurated in 1992 to address the conservation issues of Oze—include large numbers of people from different levels of governments, the private sector, environmental organizations, alpinists, the media, tourism organizations, members of guide associations, volunteers, scholars, and other experts. Some members—in particular scholars, other experts, and volunteers—come from all over the country to attend this event.

In Ogasawara and Yakushima, organizations that play central roles in nature tourism development were established based on partnerships between various government and non-government stakeholders. The establishment of OWA in 1989, in order to promote whale-watching as a development scheme for the Ogasawara Islands, was based on a partnership involving a wide range of stakeholders, including Ogasawara Village, Ogasawara Society of Commerce and Industry, the tourism associations, and the fishermen’s cooperative, as well as national and local NGOs such as the Ogasawara Marine Center and WWF-Japan. The YECF, established in 1993 to implement the “Yakushima Environmental Culture Village” master plan—which proposed ecotourism development as a new community industry alternative to mass tourism—is based on a partnership of Kagoshima Prefecture with the two local authorities.

Discussion: Setting the Stage for Sustainable Protected Area Management

The following discussion argues that under the current system of national park management, the four success factors identified in the three sites are strengths that set the stage for the development of community-based tourism across Japan. This is because such strengths effectively address the existing challenges to tourism in protected areas and, at the same time, contribute to meeting the four objectives of community-based tourism. This discussion builds upon prior work on the topic, which asserted that community-based tourism has a potentially critical role to play in facilitating effective integrated protected area management in the future (Hiwasaki 2003).

As was shown earlier, the institutional arrangements set up to deal with park management and ecotourism in Yakushima, Oze, and Ogasawara have increased stakeholder participation and representation as well as unified conservation efforts by coordinating the diverse stakeholders involved. The multistakeholder institutions set up in these protected areas have resulted in the development of guidelines and master plans that hold the keys to sustainable tourism development in protected areas. Further strengthening such institutional arrangements in the future, by coordinating the various resources targeted toward nature conservation, would reduce redundancy and unnecessary competition between different stakeholders—especially government agencies—and build consensus among local people and between local people and other stakeholders regarding their future vision of park and tourism use, including ways to deal with the various challenges facing park tourism.

Moreover, setting up an institutional mechanism to ensure the distribution of tourism benefits for community development—to involve the community as a whole in tourism and thus move beyond the popular notion that ecotourism only involves guides—is something that could be effectively accomplished with proper institutional backup, in the form of regulations or ordinances. Policy backup to set up such
community-based institutions is especially important considering the fact that, because governments are latecomers in nature-based tourism, taking a top-down approach in a game already dominated by the private sector would not only receive resistance from local people but also deprive them of ownership. Successfully establishing such institutional arrangements to ensure local participation is of particular relevance worldwide, as local participation is, and continues to be, a difficult process to implement in conservation and tourism (Wells and Brandon 1992; Kellert et al. 2000). Although institutional arrangements are an important means for promoting participation (Pyhala 2002), it should be noted that such institutions should not be too complex (Salafsky et al. 1999). As much as possible, existing institutions should be strengthened or be built upon instead of or before creating new ones, at the same time properly addressing preexisting “political baggage” such as relationships of power (Paré 2000; Mahanty and Russell 2002).

The self-regulations in the three sites discussed earlier have positively impacted the conservation of resources in and around protected areas, raised the awareness of both local people and tourists, and ensured that visitor experience is high and socially and environmentally responsible. Because these rules were developed or revised with the involvement of local people, they have also served to increase local people’s sense of belonging and ownership with respect to conservation and tourism. In Japan, the current system of national park management relies much on self-regulations for conservation, because the authority of the MoE to impose regulations in the park area is quite limited. The provision of government support to local people to create and strengthen self-regulations in the future would make it possible for them to deal more effectively with some of the challenges that exist in tourism in protected areas. Most notably, increasing the number of locally-initiated voluntary rules would enable each protected area to deal with the diversification of tourism in its domain. It should be noted that although the ability of organizations in the tourism industry to regulate themselves responsibly have been questioned (Cater 1994; Honey 1999), self-regulation is nonetheless a bottom-up approach that could potentially help to frame relevant regulations and to move tourism toward sustainability (Middleton 1997).

Increasing the environmental awareness and capacities for interpretation and guiding among local people in the three sites has improved the quality of guides, thereby contributing to the enhancement or maintenance of economic and social development, as well as resulting in increased efforts to conserve the protected area. The importance of increasing awareness of protected area managers and staff, local people, and tourists, and of building capacities of local people and authorities to effectively manage tourism has been noted elsewhere, most notably at the World Ecotourism Summit (2002).

In the future, awareness-raising and capacity-building efforts could be extended to increase the awareness of environmental and sustainable tourism issues in all local people, in particular those who are not currently directly involved with tourism or conservation issues. Capacity-building training could be specifically aimed at building the tourism management skills of all stakeholders and the entrepreneurial and creativity skills of local people, to assist them in dealing with the diversifying needs of nature tourism. Programs to educate tourists on conservation and nature tourism, so as to increase environmentally and socially responsible action, would partially address the noninstitutional aspects of overuse. Measures taken by governments, especially at the local level, to introduce capacity-building activities that focus on these areas would ensure the development of community-based tourism.
Strong partnerships in the three study sites have positively contributed to conservation by incorporating the interests of different stakeholders in creating plans and establishing organizations dedicated to sustainable tourism and protected area management. The importance of forging partnerships—particularly with local and indigenous people—is an aspect of protected area management well recognized worldwide, as is evident from the stream of declarations, statements, and policy documents produced particularly since the VIth World Congress on National Parks and Protected Areas in 1992 (Chapin 2004).

Taking this one step further, in order to effectively deal with the challenges facing tourism in Japan’s protected areas, partnership building needs to be extended to include strong partnerships among local people, between local people and other stakeholders, and among guides. Forging partnerships between local people who are directly involved with tourism and those who are engaged in the primary and secondary sectors—most notably those in agriculture, forestry, and construction, usually the ones with political power—would result in reduced conflict and increased cooperation between them and the sharing of traditional knowledge and political power. This would be an instrumental force leading to community revitalization and environmental conservation. Strengthening partnerships between local people and outsiders, government agencies in particular, is necessary to increase the level of community participation in decision-making and community ownership of tourism in protected areas. Such partnerships would address the current problem of top-down approaches to conservation. Creating partnerships among guides, as well as between guides and government stakeholders, would decrease competition and make cooperation between guides possible, thus enabling the introduction, legitimization, and acceptance of standardization or accreditation programs for guides/interpreters in order to raise the quality of guides. This would in turn ensure more socially and environmentally responsible tourism products for visitors. Therefore, providing institutional support to forge such partnerships would contribute to all four objectives of community-based tourism: greater participation and empowerment of high stake community actors, better conservation results, higher quality visitor experience, and, by implication, more economic benefit for guides.

 Needless to say, partnerships, institutional arrangements, self-regulations, and awareness raising are not mutually exclusive. In fact, a combination of these factors, or the four factors collectively, could work to address most of the challenges that exist in park management.

Conclusions

The system of park management in Japan constitutes a potentially viable mechanism for securing local community participation and building stakeholder consensus for sustainable park management. This is because the MoE has always had to involve stakeholders in park management, due to the complex land ownership and multiple-use character of the national park area. As has already been demonstrated, under this system of national park management, the strengths found in the three case-study sites set the stage for the development of community-based tourism across Japan.

NACS-J, a prominent NGO, has stated that in the Japanese context, building a system of park management that ensures community participation and transparency in decision-making, and disseminating information on the results of monitoring in parks and details of the decision-making process, is precisely what is called for in order
to build the consensus of all stakeholders regarding the sustainable management of parks (NACS-J 2000). Currently, the diversity of local communities and stakeholders in park tourism in Japan—which can be attributed to factors such as: the multiple use of the protected area; the level of economic development of the country; the frequent migration of the population between urban and rural areas; and complex land ownership arrangements—has rendered consensus building on park management and/or tourism issues difficult. Members of communities and stakeholders are extremely diverse and fluid, and often have multiple and conflicting interests, as was discussed above as challenges facing nature tourism in Japan’s protected areas. In addition to uneven relationships of power and institutional limitations, such factors currently work against the sustainable development of tourism in protected areas in Japan.

Against this background, in order to optimize the participatory potential of the national park system, the role of the MoE as coordinator of stakeholders and facilitator of bottom-up approaches to decision-making needs to be strengthened (Hiwasaki 2005). Strengthening the coordinating role of the MoE to build multistakeholder consensus regarding the objectives and long-term vision of each park, by overriding divisions between government agencies and involving local communities, can improve protected area management within the current park management system. To facilitate the strengthening of the MoE’s coordinating role and to secure local community participation in decision-making, a combination of strength factors mentioned earlier—namely, partnerships, strengthened institutions, and awareness raising—would be effective. Strengthening the appropriate institutional arrangements would set the table for discussions, and this could contribute to consensus building among the stakeholders.

Under existing conditions, by adopting the measures already mentioned—which build upon each of the four identified strengths—community-based tourism would be effectively facilitated and the challenges facing Japan’s system of park management would be systematically addressed. This would in turn significantly enhance the MoE’s capacity to propel the current situation of protected area management toward sustainability.

Future research, which focuses on the applicability of the lessons learned from the strengths of the three sites, would make an important contribution to the literature on community-based tourism. This is especially true considering the diversity of communities and stakeholders in Japan. In-depth analyses of stakeholders and deeper examination of the relationships of power that govern their interactions will be necessary in order to further refine our understanding of the policy shifts required to smooth the pathway for community-based tourism to facilitate sustainable protected area management in Japan.

Notes
1. This definition has been adopted from the one developed in the collaborative research project on community-based tourism conducted in protected areas of Indonesia, Japan and Thailand under the framework of the Asia-Pacific Environmental Innovation Project/Research on Innovative and Strategic Policy Options. More information on this project can be obtained from http://www.iges.or.jp/APEIS/RISPO.
2. Additional details and in-depth analysis of the case-study sites can be accessed through http://www.iges.or.jp/APEIS/RISPO/inventory/db/index.html.
3. Honshu is the largest island in the Japanese archipelago, and contains Japan’s major cities, such as Tokyo and Osaka.

4. “Golden Week” is a collection of three national holidays—“Green Day” on 29 April, Constitution Day on 3 May, and Children’s Day on 5 May—within seven days. In combination with well-placed weekends, the Golden Week is one of Japan’s busiest holiday seasons.

5. The introduction of utilization regulation zones by the amendments to the Natural Park Law in 2002 made it possible to limit entry to an area within a natural park by requiring advance reservations, and enabled organizations entrusted by the MoE to charge fees of up to 1000 JPY (8.33 USD) to cover their administrative costs. See Bansho (2002), Hiwasaki (2005), MoE (2002b), and Sekine and Yoshida (2003) for more details on the amendments to the Natural Parks Law.

6. One hundred mountains located all over the country were chosen in 1963 by Kyuya Fukada, author and mountaineer, based on the character, history, and style of mountains mostly over 1500 m high. Conquering all 100 mountains has become an aspiration of many middle-aged amateur mountain hikers. All but 3 of those 100 mountains are located within natural park boundaries, 73 of them in national parks (NPAJ 2004).

7. The MoE owns approximately 0.2% of the national park area it manages; almost one-quarter (24.8%) of all the national park area in Japan is privately owned, while most of the rest (61.2%) is national forest under the jurisdiction of the Forestry Agency, or publicly owned by local governments (13.5%) (Kato 2001). In addition, rivers and roads within park boundaries are under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, and Transport or prefectural governments; the fish in rivers within the national park boundaries are the responsibility of the Fisheries Agency; and natural monuments are managed by the Agency for Cultural Affairs.

8. People continue to live within the park boundaries, and socioeconomic activities such as agriculture and forestry take place within the confines of the regulations (NACS-J 2000). Private companies own and operate transportation systems, accommodation facilities, restaurants, and other services inside parks.

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