

Enhancing Rural Travel: Environmental Awareness and English Ability of Frontline Tourism Employees in Hitoyoshi Kuma Region, Kumamoto, Japan

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Abstract

In the past decades, global tourism has grown significantly. Sustainable tourism has become a buzzword and contains several offshoots: green tourism, ecotourism, among others. One facet that has been given less attention is rural tourism, and within rural tourism other forms exist, such as village tourism and agriculture tourism. Regardless of the type of traveling, the tourism industry requires those working in it to possess at least the environmental knowledge to be able to teach travelers the important parts of where they are working, not to mention English skills in order to be able to guide potential travelers adequately. In most areas this aspect is well-known, but in many countries, very little data on the environmental awareness and English ability tourism and ecotourism employees can be found. To fill this gap, the author conducted a study on the environmental awareness and English background of ecotourism employees in the Hitoyoshi Kuma Region, Kumamoto, Japan. Results found that 69% felt English ability is somewhat important. Other results show 62% of respondents think learning about the environment is very important. Of the 69% of respondents born in Hitoyoshi Kuma, 41% feel that Hitoyoshi Kuma is an interesting place to visit.

Keywords: environmental awareness; rural tourism; ecotourism; English ability; frontline tourism.

1. Introduction

Post-Covid-19, global tourism has once again taken root in the psyche of the masses. After two or three years of lockdowns, people are traveling to interesting and far-away destinations in search of unique cultural and environmental sightseeing opportunities. Travel to Japan is no exception. In fact, a Booking.com survey, completed in 2021, found that 83% of international travelers felt that sustainable tourism is essential, while 61% stated that the pandemic instilled a sense of more sustainable tourism in the future (Baiquni, et. al., 2023). Sustainable tourism, a buzzword of the 2020's, contains several types:

green tourism, soft tourism, rural tourism, and ecotourism (Juganaru, et. al., 2008). Ecotourism is more than an activity to bring attention to the environment; it assists in preserving a local culture and community and works in accordance with the principles of the SDGs (sustainable development goals) (Baiquni, et. al., 2023). In Japan, ecotourism has grown in the past few decades due to the influence of the Japan Ecotourism Society, established in 1998. Other strategies include the 1991 Ministry of Environment's plan to make ecotourism a national initiative. When people think of ecotourism in Japan, they think of Daisetsusan in Hokkaido; Hakone and Mount Fuji, not far from Tokyo; Nagano, a Shinkansen trip away from Tokyo; Yakushima, south of Kagoshima in Kyushu; and Okinawa, further south from Kyushu. In 2021, 25 destinations have been categorized as World Heritage Sites and include Yakushima Island, first recognized as a Japanese World Heritage site in 1993 (Song, et. a., 2016, in Baiquni, et. al., 2023). Other sites include Joumon Prehistoric Site in Hokkaido, and the historic sites of Shirakawa-go. All these locations can be found on ecotourism and tourism-related websites in Japan and are also noted in guidebooks. However, they are but a smattering of the eco-rich capable destinations in Japan. These destinations are touted perhaps because they are well-known and within reasonable traveling distance from urban areas, but upon investigation, one can see that in more rural areas of Japan there are many other rural eco-related and green friendly locations with interesting and unique rural ecotourism capabilities. Two of these, located on the southern-most big island of Kyushu, are Aso-Kuju National Park in Kumamoto Prefecture in central Kyushu (which is a UNESCO Geotourism Site) and Hitoyoshi Kuma Region in the southern part of Kumamoto prefecture, around the white-water of Kuma River. Aso-Kuju is gaining more popularity and has become more well-known especially in European countries; Hitoyoshi Kuma is still slowly gaining favor among other countries as well. There has been some scientific research in Hitoyoshi Kuma and overall tourism in Kyushu regarding areas devastated by recent flooding in 2020, and there has also been research into tourist satisfaction there. However, there has been little research into the ecotourism destination management that comprises English communication ability and environmental awareness in the area. In fact, overall research into ecotourism destination management with environmental awareness and English ability severely lacks. Such research into awareness and communication is crucial for the development of international tourism in any rural area in many countries and is especially important for rural areas of Japan that are also suffering from the effects of depopulation.

To attract international travelers to Japan, it goes without saying that all tourism employees, but more specifically ecotourism employees (which comprise hiking guides, sightseeing agencies, tour companies) need to have both environmental awareness and adequate English ability to communicate

fully and to teach international tourists about the unique aspects of any tourism destination, not to mention be able to guide and help them appropriately. Many unique tourism destinations have taken economic advantage of this fact; however, certain parts of rural Japan are still somewhat in their infancy when it comes to global communication, a fact that can be detrimental when attempting to attract international travelers to lesser-known regions. Recently, Japan is keenly aware of its downward economic situation and its need for inbound tourists; to attend to this goal, Japan has begun an all-out effort to market both urban and rural tourism globally. However, the extent of the English ability and environmental awareness of many of its tourism employees, especially in the outlying rural areas of Japan, is not known, as little research has been conducted in this area, specifically in the Hitoyoshi Kuma Region. Some tourism companies and websites hire Japanese to English translators and take the time to compile effective information; however, many websites and smaller companies use machine-translations in their information presumably as a cost-saving measure. These tend to have miswritten English and clunky wording and phrasing, in which important messages all but become lost.

Because of the lack of data into both the environmental awareness and English ability in Hitoyoshi Kuma ecotourism employees, the author decided to conduct a survey among ecotourism related business staff members in the area to determine their level environmental awareness, as well as their underlying interest in, and impetus to, study and use English over the long term. With the goal of giving the reader a deeper understanding of the area of concern, a background explanation of Hitoyoshi Kuma will be given first. The paper will then explore the method and materials and offer the results, next, the discussion, and finally, concluding remarks will be offered.

2. Background of Hitoyoshi Kuma



Fig. 1 Location of Hitoyoshi Kuma

Source: explorekumamoto.com, 2024.

The Hitoyoshi Kuma Region is located at the southeastern part of Kumamoto Prefecture, the area south of Fukuoka and east of Nagasaki, on the island of Kyushu, bordering Kagoshima to the south and Miyazaki to the east (Fig. 1). The entire area of Hitoyoshi Kuma consists of the neighboring towns and villages that flank the main local city of Hitoyoshi (in the south portion of Kumamoto, near Kagoshima) and lie along the Kuma River. The total land area of the whole of Hitoyoshi Kuma is 1,540 km² (Hitoyoshi-Travel.com, 2024) and the area of Hitoyoshi City (the area's main metropolis) is 210.55 km² (Hitoyoshi City Website, 2024). The map shows the entire area of Hitoyoshi Kuma, nestled between Minamata, Yatsushiro, and Miyazaki. As of the census in 2020, the population of Hitoyoshi City is 30,752, while the population of the entire encompassing area Hitoyoshi Kuma is 48,339 (citypopulation.de, 2024). Recently, the area is suffering from de-population. One reason for this is many of the younger age group have been leaving the area for the plethora of opportunities that larger cities, such as Kumamoto, Fukuoka, and Kitakyushu provide.



Fig. 2 Villages and Towns of Hitoyoshi Kuma

Source: hitoyoshi-kumaguide.com, 2022.

Hitoyoshi Kuma contains several very interesting historical and environmental related areas that are quite noteworthy. Figure 2 contains a segmented map of the small villages and towns that comprise the area; ten villages and towns, including Hitoyoshi City and Kum Village, make up the Hitoyoshi Kuma region. Hitoyoshi City, found in the southeast of the map (Number 10) is the largest and main city and the county seat.

The paper will now describe each village and town, following the numbers in the map in Fig. 2, in order to give the reader a sense of the rural nature of the area. 1) Mizukami Village contains one of the highest mountains in Central Kyushu, Mount Ichifusa, which includes a slightly difficult trek with challenging ropes, but a magnanimous view from the top with interesting rock formations. It also contains

an important shrine built over 3,000 years ago to give praise to the mountain gods. 2) Yunomae Town is the town of the Yumae Manga Library and the Yunomae Green Palace Park, and 3) Taragi, well-known for sake brewing and the buried cultural assets center. 4) Itsuki Village offers opportunities for river kayaking and contains some of the most beautiful parks in the area. 5) Sagara offers lovely views of low-lying farm areas and houses a well-known hot-spring resort area where one can stay. 6) Asagiri contains flatlands and a low, easily accessible mountain called Shiraga Peak. 7) Nishiki, offers a series of hidden caves used as shelters, barracks, and hangars during WWII and is now a museum open to the public. 8) Yamae Village houses the Yamae Village History and Folklore Museum and the lovely Maruoka Park, once a castle site, with views overlooking the rural rice paddies. 9) Kuma contains some of the most noteworthy shrines and temples in Kyushu, including several cave shrines; it also contains the well-known tourist attraction, Kyusendo Cave. 10) Hitoyoshi City itself houses some of the best shochu (a rice or potato-distilled Japanese spirit), shoyu, and rice wine breweries, and it contains some of the area's most well-known traditional inns that offer unique local food items and hand-made crafts.

3. Background of the Hitoyoshi Kuma Flood Event

In July of 2020, the Kuma River burst its bank as well as a nearby dam and several levies in one of the most drastic flood events in the history of the area. This area is no stranger to flooding; records show that between 1965 and 2011, there were seven flood-events due to heavy rain that overflowed from the Kuma River. In the 2020 flood, level 5 events (extreme hazard) totaled 3,026 buildings (Arbi, et. al., 2022). Post flood, towns and citizens in the area began a major clean-up in which historic statues, busts, and ancient war and shrine relics were discovered in flood debris, cleaned, and are currently stored in small nearby museums. The author visited the area in June of 2022 and heard stories from local citizens about the harrowing experience when the massive amount of rain that suddenly overtook the area, breaking levies and overflowing riverbanks. In many cases, treasures found buried in mud were salvaged and are stored in a local community center-turned museum, waiting to be claimed by owners. In addition to busts, Buddha statues, wooden garden and rice cleaning implements and school furnishings, pictures, medals, money, and uniforms worn by soldiers are kept. A large quantity of personal pictures of residents have been located since the flooding. Since January of 2023, residents and volunteers continue to visit the area to take part in picture-cleaning activities that aimed to salvage pictures that, waterlogged and mud-laden, continue to be found in area ruins months after the flooding.

Since then, the local prefectural government, along with residents in the area, have been continuing efforts to remodel and reconstruct devastated traditional Japanese inns, shops, restaurants, and

roads that flank the area. Unfortunately, the local train line that once connected Hitoyoshi City to other parts of Kyushu was damaged beyond repair, and recent research estimates that it will take as long as ten years to fully rebuild and reconnect the train lines that once were so useful. In fact, after the devastation of the railroad lines, access to the area become much more difficult, limited now to only to buses to and from other cities in Kyushu, a highway bus that operates on the Kyushu expressway to and from Kumamoto City, continuing on to Fukuoka in the north and Kagoshima in the south, taxis from the neighboring metropolises of Yatsushiro City and Kumamoto City, and Kagoshima City (in Kagoshima prefecture), cars rented from one of the nearby cities, or one's own personal car. It goes without saying that this lack of transportation possibilities certainly puts a damper on visitation opportunities.

4. Method and Materials

In order to investigate the environmental awareness (including environmental conservation practices) and English ability of local ecotourism employees in the entire area as depicted above, survey questionnaires were conducted during seven trips to the area from May to December 2023 in situ in the respondents' places of business. The questionnaires were completed during face-to-face interviews; the answers were written by the author and verified to avoid miscommunication. Each business was first assigned a number which was randomly chosen to avoid bias, and the interviews were conducted at places of business during working hours; one person per place of business was randomly chosen with which to conduct interviews. The 24-item questionnaire contained general socio-economic questions such as age, gender, place of birth, highest educational level, environmental conservation practices, meaning of ecotourism, environmental activities, frequency of inbound traveler visits, needs with English, and desire to study English in the future.

5. Results

Table 1. Hitoyoshi-Kuma Demographics

Total sample		29
Average age		55
Sex	F	18
	M	11
Marital	M	17
	S	12
Children	Y	19
	N	10
Place of Birth	Hitoyoshi City	20
	Other (Nishiki, Miyazaki, Kumamoto City)	9

Education	Uni	7
	HS	14
	Trade	7

Source: Compiled from survey data, 2023.

Demographic information of the Hitoyoshi Kuma region found during the interview phases is given in Table 1. The sample consisted of ecotourism employees working in the Hitoyoshi Kuma region; the types of shops chosen randomly for the interviews constituted souvenir & specialty shops, restaurants & food shops, hotels & traditional inns, and tour arrangement specialists.

As can be seen, the total sample size was 29, and all were members of the working age population employed in tourism-related businesses. The average age was 55 years old, 18 respondents were female, while 11 (38%) were male, 17 were married, and 12 were single. Of the total, 19 respondents had children, and 10 did not; 20 were born in Hitoyoshi City, while nine were born in other cities in Kumamoto Prefecture or other prefectures in the Kyushu area. Of the total, seven respondents graduated from university, 14 (48%) graduated from high school, and seven graduated from trade schools.

Table 2. Environmental Concerns and Regional Awareness (in number)

Env Concerns? (Mult. Answ.)	Garbage	17
	Rebuilding after disaster	11
	Air pollution	9
How important is learning about the environment?	Very important	18
	Important	11
What does ecotourism mean to you? (Mult. Answ.)	Eating local food	20
	Learning about nature	14
	Playing in nature	13
Hitoyoshi is an interesting place to visit.	Agree	12
	Neither agree nor disagree	10
	Strongly agree	7
How should we teach people about the environment in Hitoyoshi? (Mult. Answ.)	Share experiences	24
	Invite to a course	10
	Take them yourself	9
I get enough information about the environment in Hitoyoshi-Kuma.	Neither agree nor disagree	18
	Agree	5
	Disagree	3
	Stongly Agree	2
	Strongly disagree	1
Where would you take travelers in Hitoyoshi? (Mult. Answ.)	Itsuki Village	13
	Mizukami Village	12
	Hitoyoshi City	9
	All	6

Source: Compiled from survey data, 2023.

Table 2 contains obtained answers from questions on environmental concerns, importance of environmental learning, knowledge and awareness of ecotourism, and the teaching of information to travelers about the environment in Hitoyoshi Kuma. Some multiple answers were permitted, as this can help the author see into the thought processes of ecotourism related employees in the Hitoyoshi Kuma area. Table 2 illustrates some concerns about the environmental conservation, ecotourism, and eco-related information among Hitoyoshi Kuma ecotourism employees. As the table shows, 17 people (59%) are concerned with recycling garbage, while 11 feel that rebuilding after a disaster was of concern and nine are worried about air pollution. Of the total, 18 respondents (62%) feel that learning about the environment is very important and 11 feel that it is important; 20 respondents answered that the meaning of ecotourism is rooted in eating local foods, learning about nature, and spending time/having fun in nature. As for Hitoyoshi being an interesting place to visit, seven respondents strongly agreed, while 12 agreed. Regarding the question of how people should be taught about the environment of Hitoyoshi Kuma, where multiple answers were possible, 24 (83%) responded that they would like to share experiences, 10 would like to invite them to an environmental learning course, and nine would like to take travelers to experience natural areas themselves. Of the total, 18 neither agreed nor disagreed that they receive enough information about Hitoyoshi. About 13 people responded that they would recommend or take visitors to Itsuki Village, 12 responded that Mizukami Village would be their area of choice, and nine respondents would take them around Hitoyoshi City; six respondents stated that they would take the visitors to all the places mentioned.

Table 3. Frequency of International Visitors and English Ability (in number)

How often do international travelers visit Hitoyoshi Kuma?	Once/week	8
	Every day	5
	Once/month	5
	Once 6/month	5
	Three days/week	3
	Once/2 weeks	3
	<i>Total</i>	29
What role does English play?	Somewhat necessary	20
	Very necessary	9
	<i>Total</i>	29
How often do you need English?	Not at all	8
	Once per month	7
	Once in 6 months	6
	One day/week	4
	Every day	2
	Once/2weeks	1
	Three days/wk	1
	<i>Total</i>	29
How proficient in English do you	Simple conversation	12

want to be?	Daily conversation	8
	Business level	5
	Only words ok	3
	For no problems during travel	1
	Not necessary	0
	<i>Total</i>	<i>29</i>

Source: Compiled from survey data, 2023.

In Table 3, one can see that at present, eight employees (27%) related that international tourists visit Hitoyoshi Kuma once per week, while five employees (17%) answered respectively that tourists visited every day, once per month, or once in six months. As for the necessity of English, 20 respondents (86%) stated that it is somewhat necessary, and nine (31%) stated that it is very necessary. This may be true; however, as for the question of English needs, eight respondents (28%) stated that they do not need it at all, while seven (24%) said they need it once per month, and two of the total strata (7%) stated they need it every day.

6. Discussion

As the demographic data show, the average age of the sample strata was 55, and 20 were born in the Hitoyoshi Kuma area; nine were born in other cities or prefectures and moved to Hitoyoshi-Kuma for reasons such as marriage or work. The fact that the majority of respondents are from the area and decided to stay says a lot about the locale itself. In fact, one respondent, born in Fukuoka, moved to Hitoyoshi Kuma because she simply loves the nature found in the area. As for education, the majority graduated from High School, while seven graduated from trade school, and seven from university. This also says a plethora as the respondents felt they could accomplish much without further education or chose not to as they felt the area offered enough for their future lives.

Table 2 displays environmental concerns, and here, it can be seen that although multiple answers were allowed, 59% felt strongly about garbage in general; while 38% felt that rebuilding after a disaster was a topic of great concern. Of the total, 62% of people thought that learning about the environment is very important, and 11 important, a fact which can be a testament to the beautiful area of Hitoyoshi Kuma.

Since the environment, nature, and ecology takes a large proportion of area activities, the question of ecotourism arose. Most respondents felt that eating local foods is part of ecotourism, which is entirely true, but entails more than that. This idea can be linked directly to regional agriculture, and this, too, is a part of ecotourism. People often think of spending time in nature is an equivalent meaning of

ecotourism, and of course it is, However, equally important is what exactly people do with their time spent there, such as learning about the natural environment around them through hands-on, experiential learning. Environmental and conservation learning is an important part of any environmental activity, and more emphasis should be placed on activities that teach these particular aspects in this region.

The next statement and connected answers leave the author feeling somewhat vexed in that 10 people (34%) neither agree nor disagree that Hitoyoshi Kuma is an interesting place to visit. Though the amount is less than half, the author still wonders why this discrepancy even exists. Perhaps it could be that those living in a certain area do not appreciate its charm and positive points, may have lost sight of its appealing points, or they may be so close to the activity that they may not see the unique points. It also could be that many of them may simply not be interested in environmental aspects in the first place. In any case, it is worth investigating why so few people find their own unique area interesting. Even though 10 respondents neither agreed nor disagreed that Hitoyoshi Kuma is interesting place to visit, 12 people agree and seven people strongly agreed with this. In fact, 24 respondents feel that they would like to teach people about the environment through sharing experiences. In order to do this, 10 respondents would take people to some kind of environmental training course, and nine would take visitors to mountain training by themselves. Even though multiple answers were allowed, many respondents feel positive about introducing area attractions to the international travelers.

Having said that, 24 people responded that when it comes to teaching travelers about the environmental aspects of Hitoyoshi Kuma, they would share personal experiences with them. Upon investigation, the author found that this means employees would talk about their own experiences extensively and this includes sharing pictures and stories about travel and the environment. Ten people would invite travelers to a course about the environment and ecotourism aspects, and nine people responded that they would accompany travelers themselves and allow them to engage in interesting and useful ecotourism related experiences.

As for obtaining adequate information on Hitoyoshi Kuma, 18 people stated that they neither agree nor disagree that they receive enough information about the area. Again, this answer was somewhat vexing, and quite unfortunate that the local government does not or cannot share more important information. Such lacking information includes weather related destruction and rebuilding costs and funding earmarked for revitalization efforts.

English Needs & English Ability

As for English needs and ability, nine people responded that English is very necessary and 20 felt that it is somewhat necessary, which could account for the employees' feelings about English needs, as eight stated they do not need English at all, seven stated they need it once per month, six stated they need it once in six months. Therefore, the consensus that 12 people strive for only English for simple conversations is understandable. Eight stated that they would like to learn English for daily conversation. Eight people also said that international travelers visit the area once per week, while five said they visit every day, and five also said they visit once in six months. In fact, the area is suffering from depopulation in which many young people move out of the area in search of work elsewhere in larger cities. As a result, many members of the older generation feel that they are not capable of learning or practicing English at this stage. However, 12 respondents stated in the question "how proficient in English do you want to be?" (Table 3), that they at least want to become proficient enough to be able to converse in simple conversations in English, a goal that is not without merit. Since learning about the environment is very important according to 18 respondents, learning at least some English may help them communicate with international travelers who are interested in learning about the environment of Japan and engaging in ecotourism activities.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has hopefully illuminated some of the shortcomings of existing environmental knowledge and feelings from the community about the interest the Hitoyoshi Kuma region contains and may also shed some light on the propensity to learn English and English needs in general there. Many residents know the charm and uniqueness of the area, but when asked if they feel it could draw international travelers, many were not sure. The flooding and subsequent disruption of trainlines have certainly curtailed access to the area, making direct transit from Kumamoto City (the largest nearby city and capital of Kumamoto Prefecture) difficult. As a result, many tourists including international ones, fly into Kagoshima Airport, an approximate 40-minute travel distance from Hitoyoshi Kuma. While this is one way to access the area, it excludes the possibility of visiting the capital and sightseeing attractions found in the northern part of Kumamoto Prefecture. Many respondents stated that teaching would-be travelers about the environment of Hitoyoshi Kuma is important, and even opened the possibility of learning English more. The fact that local citizens are concerned about garbage and rebuilding after a disaster can help strengthen community bonds in the future. While getting adequate information about Hitoyoshi Kuma in general is also concerning, one hopes that through research such as this in the future, residents can further see and appreciate the beauty their area contains. If the story of Hitoyoshi Kuma can

generate more interest in rural tourism and bring people to enjoy the area's richness, then it can be a national model of sustainability that will last long into the future.

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