

**** Asia-Pacific Environmental Innovation Strategies (APEIS)
Research on Innovative and Strategic Policy Options (RISPO)
Good Practices Inventory**

**Using Visitor Fees to Maintain Forests for Nature Tourism Activities in
Yakushima Island, Kirishima-Yaku National Park**

Summary of the Practice

Keywords: Visitors fee, Natural Forests for Recreation, nature trails.

Strategy: (6) Facilitating community-based tourism in protected areas.

Environmental areas: (4) Ecosystem and biodiversity conservation; (8) forest conservation.

Critical instruments: Economic instrument; organisational arrangement; self-regulatory instrument.

Country: Japan.

Location: Shiratani-unsuikyo and Yakugui-land, Yakushima Island, Kirishima-Yaku National Park.

Participants: Forestry Agency (Yakushima Forest Environment Conservation Centre), community organizations (“Big Nature Green Association” and “Association to Beautify Yakusugi-land”), and visitors.

Duration: 1993 – present.

Funding: “Cooperation fees” paid upon entry by visitors; Forestry Agency.

Background: Yakushima Island, located off the coast of Kagoshima in southern Kyushu, is well known for its natural beauty, rich biodiversity and its forests of ancient Yaku-sugi (*Cryptomeria japonica*, or Japanese cedar trees, that are more than one thousand years old). The island’s numerous protected area designations are National Park and Wilderness Area (both by the Ministry of the Environment); Forest Ecosystem Reserve (by Forestry Agency), Special Natural Monument (by the Agency for Cultural Affairs), and Biosphere Reserve (under UNESCO’s Man and the Biosphere Programme). The island is the best known for its World Heritage status; approximately 20 percent of the 50,000 hectare island was inscribed on UNESCO’s World Heritage List as natural property in 1993.

Yakushima is renowned by nature lovers as a prime ecotourism destination. The word ecotourism was first used in the context of Yakushima in 1992 in the “Yakushima Environmental Culture Village” master plan. The master plan proposed ecotourism development as a new community industry which could become an alternative to mass tourism (Kuriyama et al. 2000:46-55; KRIC 2002). To implement the master plan, the Yakushima Environmental Culture Foundation (YECF) was established by Kagoshima Prefecture and the two local governments the following year. In addition to managing two facilities—Yakushima Environmental Culture Village Center and Yakushima Environmental Culture Learning Center—YECF has played an important role in promoting ecotourism on the island.

Ecotourism on the island has primarily been led by the private sector. In 1993, the Yakushima Nature Activity Center (YNAC), generally acknowledged as a pioneer of its kind in Japan, began offering various kinds of guided ecotours. Since then, the number of ecotour guides on the island has increased to one hundred, and currently there are about thirty organizations offering various nature activities. Despite the popularity of ecotourism on the island, tourism still poses a threat to the natural environment. The number of visitors to the island drastically increased in the late 1980s when high-speed “jetfoil” boats were put into service, shortening the trip from Kagoshima City and offering more trips per day than the ferry. The concentration of visitors to certain parts of the island at selected times of the year has caused serious problems of overuse, such as erosion of trekking routes, destruction of



*Wooden footpaths in Yakusugi-land
Photo by Lisa Hiwasaki*

plants due to trampling, waste disposal, and water pollution arising from inadequate toilet facilities (Sayama and Nishida 2000:750). The number of tourists peaked in the year 2001 at 286,000, more than twenty times the population of the island which stands at 14,000 (Hiyoshi 2002:100-101).

One of the primary natural attractions of Yakushima, the Yaku-sugi, had been the target of logging for centuries. Logging had been an important industry on the island, which is mostly covered by forest, 78 percent of which is owned by the Forestry Agency as a National Forest. Logging of Japanese cedars played an important role in the economy of the island beginning in the 16th century and culminating in the 1960s and 1970s when approximately 70 percent of Yakusugi on the island are said to have been felled in a large-scale plantation forest scheme (Kuriyama et al. 2000:40-45; 50; Sayama and Nishida 2000:750). It was also around this time that a movement to conserve Yaku-sugi was born on the island. An environmental organization—composed of youth who had grown up in Yakushima—called the “Society to Protect Yakushima” was organized in early 1970s, partly in reaction to the “discovery” in 1966 of “Jomon-sugi,” a Yaku-sugi purported to be more than 7,000 years old (Shiba 2002). The culmination of this local-level nature conservation movement is said to have led to the formulation of the “Yakushima Environmental Culture Village” master plan in the early 1990s and the island’s inscription on the World Heritage List in 1993, as described above.



*Information board in Shiratani-unsuikyo
Photo by Lisa Hiwasaki*

In recent years the policy of the Forestry Agency has shifted dramatically, reflecting a decline in the demand for timber from the Japanese trees as well as environmental concerns. From a mostly timber-production purpose for the National Forest, focus has shifted to conservation and recreational use. It is in this context that building nature trails in the “Natural Forest for Recreation”—a thirty-plus year old program of putting aside National Forests for recreational use—began in Yakushima, in 1992. The two such forests, Shiratani-unsuikyo and Yakusugi-land, are currently the island’s most popular tourist attractions; approximately eighty

Since 1995, a fee of 300 yen (US\$2.50) has been collected at the entrance of each site as “Forest Environment Maintenance Promotion Cooperation Fees” by members of local organizations commissioned by the Forestry Agency. The money collected is directed towards local organizations for maintenance of the forest.

Although this system of collecting Forest Maintenance Cooperation Fees is prevalent in some of the 1,283 Recreational Forests around the country, the two sites in Yakushima are known as the only “successful” cases where the system is viable.

Objectives: “Natural Forests for Recreation,” one of the six categories of “Recreational Forests” designated by the Forestry Agency in National Forest, are categorized as such because of their scenic beauty and suitability for recreational activities such as hiking and camping. The objective of “Forest Environment Maintenance Promotion Cooperation Fees” is to seek voluntary cooperation from users in order to maintain the forest and the natural environment.

Description of the activity: The components of Natural Forests for Recreation and Cooperation Fees in Shiratani-unsuikyo and Yakusugi-land are:

- **Forest Maintenance Cooperation Fees:** voluntary fees of 300 yen paid by each visitor to enter each site (residents of Yakushima do not have to pay). The cooperation fee is directed towards maintenance of the forest, nature trails, facilities and clean-up, as well as covering personnel expenses and other administrative costs for managing the sites.
- **Local organizations:** two local organizations, established in Yakushima by the two towns (Kami-yaku and Yaku), have been commissioned by the Forestry Agency to provide maintenance at these sites. The “Big Nature Green Association” is based in Kami-Yaku Town and the “Association to Beautify Yakusugi-land” is in Yaku Town. Funding for the

- associations to hire a minimum of two caretakers at each site—who collect the fees, hand-out brochures, and provide information to visitors—comes from the cooperation fee.
- **Construction and maintenance of nature trails:** Shiratani-unsuikyo has three nature trails (varying from approximately 60 – 180 minutes in length) in an area of 424 hectares. Yakusugi-land, which can accommodate large tour buses, has four nature trails (30 – 150 minutes) in an area of 270 hectares. The shorter trails in both areas are equipped with wooden or pebbled footpaths which enable all people, regardless of age, fitness level and equipment to enjoy nature.
 - **Shop and rest areas:** rest area facilities are located at the entrance of Yakusugi-land on top of a shop which sells local crafts made of Yaku-sugi (note: the only use of Yaku-sugi permitted today is from unearthing buried timber and stumps). These facilities are environmentally friendly: a charge for the pay toilet facilities (voluntary 100 yen or U.S.\$0.80 per use) covers maintenance costs, and all the electricity used in the building is derived from solar energy.

Critical Instruments

Overview

This practice is noted as a “good” practice for two reasons: one, the successful implementation of a voluntary entrance fee which is directed towards environmental conservation; and two, an institutional structure and cooperative relationship between the Forestry Agency and local organizations which has facilitated economic development around the area. The first was made possible by using economic and self-regulatory instruments; the second, by organizational arrangement.

Economic instrument

Implementing a fee system for purposes of conservation upon those who enter a natural area has not been successful in other places around the country. This could be ascribed to a common mindset in Japan that nature should be free to be enjoyed by anyone at any time. As mentioned above, the two sites in Yakushima are the only sites in Japan where Forest Environment Maintenance Promotion Cooperation Fees have been implemented successfully, in the sense that it pays to place caretakers at the entrance. Here, almost all visitors pay because there are caretakers at the entrance; in other Recreational Forests, only donation boxes have been placed at the entrance. These two sites can afford to hire caretakers because the number of visitors is large enough and the money collected is sufficient. Until the recent amendment of the Natural Parks Law, it was not possible to charge fees upon entry to a protected area. Even now, this economic instrument (which began in 1993) is not legally binding, and must be used in combination with the self-regulatory instrument, as follows..

Self-regulatory instrument

Paying “Cooperation Fees” at Natural Forests for Recreation is voluntary (although in the two sites at Yakushima, it is difficult not to pay, since caretakers are placed at the entrance). According to staff of the Forestry Agency, the feedback they have received from visitors is mostly positive. Most visitors see no problem in paying the money, especially when it is explained that all of the money is directed towards conservation of the areas. Although setting of the price is arbitrary, the amount is considered by most visitors as a good value for the money.

Organizational arrangement

The arrangement in place at Yakushima, whereby a local organization was set up by each of the two local towns in order to work with the Forestry Agency, has given legitimacy and local ownership to the system, as well as contributing to economic development of the area. Distribution of the sites in two administrative towns creates fairness so that each town has its own tourism attraction and employment opportunities.

Impacts

As mentioned above, one of the reasons this practice is recognized as a “good” practice is that voluntary entrance fees have been directed towards environmental conservation. This is of particular importance because of possible applications to other emerging endeavours around the country, such as charging fees to enter Utilization Regulation Areas (in Natural Parks, made possible by the recent amendments to the Natural Parks Law) and the Environmental Cooperation Fee, currently being considered in Yakushima Island as a whole. Secondly, the cooperative relationship between the Forestry Agency and local organizations has facilitated economic development on the island. The institutional set-up has not only led to employment opportunities for local people, but has contributed to economic development through the sale of local handicrafts available in the shop outside Yakusugi-land.

The biggest impact, however, is an unintended one, the practice’s contribution to nature tourism and environmental education as well as the resulting increased environmental awareness of visitors and locals alike. Almost all tours offered by the numerous ecotour operators on the island include trips to one or both of the sites. Its indirect contribution to development of ecotourism on the island—and its economic benefits to local ecotour guides—is immense when considering that by maintaining the trails and conserving the forests of Yakushima, the Forestry Agency has provided an ideal environment for environmental education and ecotourism.

Another unintended impact of this practice, albeit a negative one, is that it has led to the birth of other “cooperation fees”. Such fees—for example, to see turtles laying eggs, or to see large banyan trees—are becoming unpopular with tourists because of their cost and the lack of transparency regarding what the money is being used for. As a result, Yakushima is considering introducing a system of “Environmental Cooperation Fee” whereby visitors will pay one lump sum to enjoy the diverse nature attractions on the island and to contribute in that way to the conservation of these resources. This system, about which discussions began in late 2003, will be a difficult one to implement. With the proper institutional back-up, however, such a system could become an example for other parts of the country.



*Nature interpretation at Yakusugi-land
Photo by Lisa Hiwasaki*

Lessons Learned

There are several lessons that can be learned from this experience. The most important lesson is the need for transparency regarding what a “cooperation fee” is being used for. As mentioned above, other sites have begun to demand “cooperation fees,” but their systems have become the target of many negative complaints by tourists. When implementing similar systems, such as the “Environmental Cooperation Fee” mentioned above, transparency would be necessary. Transparency and information dissemination would also increase the understanding and awareness of visitors, while a strong institutional back-up (laws or policy) to such a system would give it legitimacy. At the same time, it is also important to differentiate environmental cooperation fees from other entrance fees (such as to theme parks) so that visitors are aware that their money is directed towards conservation, not profit.

Potential for Application

As mentioned above, this practice has been applied to other natural attractions around the island, but with little success. Transparency and legitimacy are important, but might have been lacking in these other cases. The fact that a similar system has been in place in other Natural Forests for Recreation but

with little success also points to the fact that the number of visitors must be high for such a system to be sustainable. In conclusion, such fees can only be introduced successfully in an area with a large number of visitors; relying solely on the good will of visitors to pay (e.g. by only placing donation boxes at the entrance) is not effective.

Contact

Yakushima Forest Environment Conservation Centre, Forestry Agency
1577-1 Miyanoura, Kami-yakucho, Kumage-gun, Kagoshima-ken, JAPAN
Telephone: +81-9974-2-0331

Kami-yaku Town (“Big Nature Green Association”)
1593 Miyanoura, Kami-yakucho, Kumage-gun, Kagoshima-ken, JAPAN
Telephone: +81-9974-2-0100

“Association to Beautify Yakusugi-land”
187-1, Anbo, Yakucho, Kumage-gun, Kagoshima-ken, JAPAN
Telephone: +81-9974-6-3144

Yakushima Tourism Association
310-1 Koseda, Kami-yakucho, Kumage-gun, Kagoshima-ken, JAPAN
Telephone: +81-9974-2-4010

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Case reviewer: Lisa Hiwasaki, Visiting Researcher, IGES hiwasaki@iges.or.jp

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