

Ecotourism, and relationships with the community

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I came to Amami Oshima for the first time in August 2011. I visited various places from the north to the south of the island, and I experienced the nature, history, and culture of Amami. I fell completely in love with Amami during the course of my three-day trip, and I had a vague desire to learn more about Amami. Therefore, I chose Amami as my research subject in graduate school while at Kagoshima University, and I began going to the island on a regular basis. Here, I would like to introduce the kind of survey research I have been doing in Amami Oshima, with the keyword of “relationships with the community.”

I chose tourism and ecotourism in Amami as my research topic. Ecotourism is a form of sustainable tourism—a tourism concept that makes the appropriate use of the nature, history, and culture of a region while using of them. Its characteristics involve (1) the importance of having a guide (in order for tourists to further understand the region), and (2) conducting this tourism on a smaller scale (in order to reduce the burden on the natural environment and local community). Ocean activities such as diving, snorkeling, and whale watching; canoeing in mangrove forests in Sumiyo town; walks in the Kinsakubaru national forest; and observing wild animals and plants such as the Amami rabbit all come under the umbrella of ecotourism.

In 2013, when I began surveying the island, the Amami Islands Wide Area Office Association (administrative organization where 12 municipalities of the Amami Islands gathered) brought together guides under a single organization as part of efforts towards World Natural Heritage registration. They put in efforts for creating a system of cooperation and improving quality among guides. I interviewed registered guides of the Amami Oshima Eco-Tour Guide Liaison Council (established in 2008) on the reasons why they became a guide, their way of thinking about nature, what they recognized as valuable nature, and how they spoke to tourists. I also asked their thoughts on the importance of history and culture in these interviews.

I paid particular attention to the organizations and people on the island who have been conducting nature observation meetings and conservation activities since the late 1980s in association with these efforts. Among the people operating guide businesses in Amami Oshima, most ocean guides (including those for diving) were migrants; but most in the fields of nature, history, and culture of the land were from Amami. I learned that about half of these people were U-turners who re-affirmed the value of Amami after leaving the island to go on to school or employment and became involved in nature observation meetings and conservation activities after returning to the island.

At the beginning of my surveys, I focused on people who actively used the nature of given areas for tourism (government and guides), but in reality, there were few opportunities for directly interacting with local residents who continued to live in that natural area. From

October 2014 for half a year, when there was still a regional revitalization cooperation team in Amami Oshima, I became involved with the residents by working in the Sumiyo General Branch Industrial Construction Division in the Amami city long-term internship system, “Knowledge / regional revitalization cooperation project” for university students. With the cooperation of members of the NPO Sumiyo Yamura Land and the Sumiyo Town Union Youth Group, we created a walking course and map utilizing the familiar nature and culture of the Satochi / Satoyama, and implementing targeted monitoring tours for islanders outside of Sumiyo town.

What I learned from this experience is that these kinds of tourism cannot be maintained without the participation of residents. No amount of effort by strangers to come up with ideas and create new plans have meaning if nobody is there to continue them. There is a limit to how long such matters can be left to strangers. However, when personally calling upon the local people and becoming a tourist menu creator, I learned that “resident participation” and “cooperation” were easy words to say but difficult to put into practice.

After returning to the university, I visited Sumiyo town regularly and began to ask the residents about their relationship with nature, questions I had previously asked the government and guides. What does the nature of the area used for tourism mean to the residents? For example, in the case of mangrove forests, most of the residents recognized the forests as a natural landscape that they took for granted when they saw from the road, and only a small number of people used them in their daily lives. Furthermore, the mountain paths, which are now used for night tours, were only used by people involved in forestry. Since the mid-1990s, outsiders such as governments and guides evaluated these natural areas as valuable resources that could be developed for tourism and World Natural Heritage sites, and residents in recent years have begun to review these local resources once again. It was not the case that these regions have nothing, but rather, they were buried with treasure. Fortunately, the nature, history, and culture of the region have been reviewed from each standpoint and are beginning to be passed down because of the collaborative activities of outsiders and locals.

I would like to continue such investigations in the future, and most importantly, keep a record of the investigation results. Hopefully in the future I can use the records I have made with the local people when I researched Sumiyo town of this era.



Place for discussion for local issues among local people (April 1, 2017, Sumiyo inland sea Park Bungalow)