



2023 TOP 100 GOOD PRACTICE STORY

Title: From a Miner's Mountain to a Tourist's Mountain

-- Japan's First Certified Guided Tour in a Volcano

Destination, Country: Teshikaga Town, Japan

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In the category: Destination Management Environment & Climate Thriving Communities
 Nature & Scenery Culture & Tradition Business & Marketing

The Story in a picture:

Climbing Atosanupuri Volcano with a certified guide



Summary:

(1) Problem: Teshikaga Town, a town rich in nature in a national park, had experienced a sharp decline in the number of tourists since the beginning of the 2000s. Many people said that in order to rebuild the town's "tired" economy and to create a new attraction as a tourism destination, a mountain climbing tour should be developed at Mt. Io, also known as Atosanupuri, a volcano that has long been cherished by the local people. However, Atosanupuri had been off-limits since 2000 due to the danger of falling rocks.

(2) Solution: The resources of "Atosanupuri" were designated as a specific natural tourism resource based on the Ecotourism Promotion Law, and a unique certified guide system was established after restricting entry.

(3) Result: A trekking tour up Atosanupuri was developed under the guidance of certified guides. A system was also established to return a portion of the tour participation fees to environmental improvement expenses. The tour won the "18th Ecotourism Grand Prize". Local residents and elementary school students are also offered the opportunity to climb the mountain free of charge.





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Good Practice Story:

Destination description

Brief background of the destination.

Teshikaga Town, located in the eastern part of Hokkaido, is rich in nature, with 65% of the town area designated as Akan Mashu National Park. Most of the town lies within the Kussharo Caldera, the largest caldera in Japan. Lake Kussharo, the largest caldera lake in Japan; Lake Mashu, one of the clearest lakes in the world; an active volcano, deep forests, and the Kushiro River, referred to as a sacred place for canoeists -- are all located in Teshikaga Town, where many wild animals and about 6,500 people live in harmony amid this abundance of nature.

One of the places in Teshikaga where one can best feel the caldera land is the Atosanupuri volcano, which is still erupting. In the language of the indigenous Ainu people, "Atosanupuri" means "naked mountain." This mountain has been important to the Ainu people since ancient times, providing source of highly acidic hot spring water, which gushes out at the Kawayu Hot Springs at the foot of the mountain. The mountain was also used as a sulfur mine from 1877 to 1963 because of the high-quality sulfur that could be extracted there. Many miners stayed in the area, where a railroad was built to transport the sulfur, which played a major role in the development of Hokkaido today.

Issues faced

Problems/issues solved with the Good Practice Story.

In 1991, the number of annual overnight visitors to Teshikaga reached 730,000, of which 560,000 stayed in the Kawayu Hot Springs area alone. However, after that the number of overnight visitors has since declined sharply, as travel patterns have shifted from group tourists to individual travelers (FITs). By 2015, the number of overnight visitors was one-third of what it was at its peak. The decline in visitors led to a variety of problems for the region, including an increase in the number of abandoned hotels, population decline, stagnation in the local economy, and deterioration of the field environment due to a lack of maintenance cost.

In order to rebuild the local economy to solve these problems, many people wanted to develop a mountain climbing tour in "Atosanupuri," an important place full of local attractions. After all, this is a special place where one can experience volcanic activity in the Kussharo Caldera, which is also an important source of hot springs for local residents. However, this mountain, which once prospered from sulfur mining, was closed to visitors by the Forestry Agency, which manages the land, after a rockfall accident occurred in 2000. We were faced with the challenge of reviving this inaccessible area as a tourist destination again and at the same time how protect the valuable resources of Atosanupuri.

Methods, steps, and tools applied

Solutions implemented to address the sustainability problems or issues.

The most important tool for developing mountaineering tours was the "Teshikaga-style Ecotourism Promotion Overall Concept," which is a system based on the law and is a guideline set by each region to promote ecotourism. In 2016, Teshikaga became the first region in Hokkaido to be certified under the overall concept, clearly defining the nature and rules to be protected.

The overall concept was formulated by the Teshikaga Eco-machi Promotion Council, a resident-led community development organization established in 2008. The entire council has been promoting eco-tourism in order to create a sustainable tourist area and a town that residents themselves are proud to live in.

Teshikaga Town and the Teshikaga Eco-machi Promotion Council took the lead in developing the mountain climbing tour at the Atosanupuri volcano, following the steps below:

(STEP 1) Designated a specific natural tourist resource and restriction of entry:

Atosanupuri Volcano has approximately 1,500 fumaroles and beautiful yellow needle-like sulfur crystals that can be seen around the fumaroles. To ensure that these rare fumaroles and sulfur crystals are not damaged by climbing, the overall ecotourism promotion plan was revised in 2020 to designate the fumaroles and sulfur crystals as "designated natural tourism resources" that require special protection. Subsequently, Atosanupuri was designated as a restricted-entry zone under the Ecotourism Promotion Law.

(STEP 2) Established a certified guide system:

Climbing a volcano involves not only concerns about environmental degradation, but also risks such as eruptions and falling rocks. Therefore, a "certified guide system" has been established so that climbers can climb the mountain only under the guidance of guides who are well versed in the nature and characteristics of the mountain. Guides must meet the following four requirements: 1) hold a Hokkaido Outdoor Guide certification 2) Attend "Atosanupuri Studies" 3) have climbed the mountain a specified number of times as a support guide 4) be a resident of the town. By clearing these conditions and receiving the certification of the Teshikaga Eco-machi Promotion Council, it will be possible to guide in the restricted area. For the actual implementation of the tour, we also developed guidelines for the maximum number of participants, how to tell the local story, and how to ensure safety.

(STEP 3) Established a system to allocate a portion of the participation fee to environmental conservation:

In efforts to achieve both nature conservation and a circular economy, and to encourage travelers to take responsibility for the local environment, we created a system in which a portion of the tour participation fee is earmarked for environmental conservation and trail maintenance.

The mountain climbing tour in Atosanupuri developed in this way with full-scale sales beginning in 2021 as the "Atosanupuri Trekking Tour" organized by the regional DMO. By participating in the tours, travelers can learn about the origins of the Kussharo Caldera and Kawayu Hot Springs, the flora and fauna living in the volcano and the unique natural environment, along with the history of sulfur mining, while also contributing to the conservation of the local natural environment.

Key success factors

Critical elements that led to successfully solving the issues.

Three main success factors were identified:

- (1) Revision of the overall eco-tourism promotion concept and designation of Atosanupuri as a restricted-access area. This was the first case in Japan to designate a specific natural tourism resource, designate a restricted area based on this designation, and restrict the number of visitors to the area.
- (2) We took the time to consult not only with the town office, but also with the Forestry Agency, the Ministry of the Environment, the fire and police departments, guide organizations, and many other related organizations. The Teshikaga Eco-machi Promotion Council, which played a central role in the project, is an organization with solid public-private partnerships, which also contributed greatly to the success of the development.
- (3) The introduction of a certified guide system. The Council has promoted efforts to support in refining the skills of guides and institutionalizing requirements for certified guides. This has resulted

in the development of guides with a deep understanding and philosophy of Atosanupuri and its surroundings.

Lessons learned

Challenges faced while implementing the Good Practice and their solutions.

The most important factors to realize the tour were balancing resource protection and safety, securing access rights for local residents, and informing them of the rules.

- Resource protection was achieved by touring in small groups with certified guides with in-depth knowledge, preventing valuable natural resources from being damaged, and at the same time allocating a portion of the participation fee to resource protection and route inspection and maintenance costs.
- Ensuring safety began with establishing safe routes and emergency evacuation routes with many stakeholders, including the fire and police departments, Forestry Agency, and Ministry of the Environment. We set detailed and strict requirements for the certified guides in charge of the actual tours and limited the number of participants to six to ensure the safety of the tours. In addition, to improve the safety of all activities in the area, we also regularly hold "outdoor guiding skill improvement workshops" for all guides working in the area.
- To ensure that this place, loved by local residents for many years, does not become "a distant mountain that you have to pay to climb," local elementary school students are invited to participate in trekking tours every year. We also ensure accessibility by holding monitoring tours for local residents twice a year in cooperation with the Board of Education.
- The revenue brought to the community through the tours is returned to the community, with a portion of the proceeds going toward environmental improvements. The increase in the number of participants improves the local environment and economy.
- Atosanupuri has clearly defined rules to control visitors, but at the same time, we have put up easy-to-understand signs at the entrance of the climbing route indicating that it is off-limits so that people who do not follow the rules do not violate the law and invade the mountain. Also, leaflets are distributed at visitor centers in the district and stores at the foot of the mountain to educate visitors.

Achievements and Results

Direct and indirect results of the Good Practice.

- 1) Developed and launched the Atosanupuri trekking tour as a new tourism resource.
- 2) Designated the fumaroles and sulfur crystals of Atosanupuri as designated natural tourism resources.
- 3) Designated the area as a restricted-entry zone based on the Ecotourism Promotion Law for the first time in Japan.
- 4) A total of 71 people has participated in the "Atosanupuri Studies" course, which is a requirement for certified guides.
- 5) "Atosanupuri Trekking Tour" by certified guides has been on sale since the spring of 2021. In 2022, 196 people participated in the tour, generating a sales amount of 1,482,000 yen, of which 106,200 yen was donated to Teshikaga Town as an environmental improvement fund. This fund is used for trail maintenance in the town, including Atosanupuri, as part of giving back to the community.
- 6) Every year, local 5th and 6th graders are invited to a trekking tour free of charge.
- 7) Twice a year, we offer the opportunity for town residents to participate in the Atosanupuri trekking tour as a "town resident monitor tour." In 2022, 40 people participated, and all responded "satisfied" or "very satisfied" in a questionnaire conducted after the climb.

Tips for other destinations

Your suggestions or recommendations for other destinations facing the same issues or implementing similar solutions

First, it is important to establish a policy.

First is to discuss, establish, and share a policy within the community regarding what resources must be protected as a community, what needs to be done to protect those resources, what needs to be preserved for the next generation, and what kind of visitors the community would like to receive.

It is also important to help the residents develop a love for their community. Love of the community is the most important element, the cornerstone of all efforts. Initiatives that can support the voluntary activities of local people and platforms that can reflect their opinions in policies will help to develop tourist destinations with more consideration for the community.

We must remember that we are not aiming for a good region for visitors, but for local residents.

Recognitions and Additional references

Recognitions and awards the Good Practice received and supporting evidence.

In February 2023, the Atosanupuri Trekking Tour received the Grand Prize, the highest award presented at the 18th Ecotourism Awards, an event jointly sponsored by the Ministry of the Environment and the Japan Ecotourism Society.

- 18th Ecotourism Grand Prize https://www.env.go.jp/press/press_01217.html
- Teshikaga Eco-machi Promotion Council <https://teshikaga-ecomachi.studio.site/>
- Teshikaga-style Ecotourism Promotion Overall Concept
<https://www.town.teshikaga.hokkaido.jp/kurashi/soshikiichiran/kankoshokoka/3/ecotourism.html>
<https://www.town.teshikaga.hokkaido.jp/material/files/group/9/ecotourism2.pdf>
- Atosanupuri Trekking Tour <https://www.masyuko.or.jp/at/>
- Atosanupuri Trekking Tour Pamphlet
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1QOyvYnaKwzV1OPkmiyuIND_6_sr5dWRu/view?usp=sharing
- Atosanupuri Trekking Tour Video <https://youtu.be/LmExzksKrp0>
- Teshikaga Hokkaido Japan video <https://youtu.be/uj2iWUE-1WM>
- Teshikaga Town pictures and videos
<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1tidtAHMPGJXK4ctYSCZYgpabxuSUe?usp=sharing>