From Abandoned to Essential: How a Retired Railway Became the Lifeline of a Community

Annaka City, Gunma Prefecture, Japan
Annaka City Destination Management Organization
Local Destinations (including villages, cities, municipalities, islands)
People & Community

Summary of Good Practice Story
After Japan's Hokuriku Shinkansen replaced the century-old Usui Pass railway in 1997, the abandoned line near Annaka City sat overgrown and largely forgotten, along with the local pride tied to it. Rather than simply preserving the tracks as static relics, the Annaka Tourism Association reimagined the line as a lived experience: the guided "Haisen Walk" turns a 20-minute former train ride into a half-day trek through tunnels and brick bridges while guides share community memories. Regular walking also functioned as informal safety patrol, prompting formal cooperation with the Gunma Forest Management Office on environmental monitoring, while visitors evolved into a "relational population" — over 120 registered supporters now help maintain the tracks. Since launching in 2018, the walk has drawn over 12,000 cumulative visitors and now generates about 80% of the tourism organisation's independent revenue. An earlier attempt at flashy infrastructure (EV rail carts) failed, teaching the key lesson that reviving heritage assets depends on rebuilding relationships between people and place, not new hardware.

Setting the Scene: Destination & context
Located approximately 100 kilometers northwest of Tokyo, Annaka City in Gunma Prefecture is home to the Usui Pass, a mountainous area that has served as a vital transportation hub for

people, goods, and culture since ancient times. In the modern era, the Shin-etsu Main Line between Yokogawa and Karuizawa supported regional development as one of Japan's most formidable mountain railways. The series of tunnels and brick bridges built to conquer the steep pass symbolize the advanced civil engineering of the time and are now preserved as Nationally Designated Important Cultural Properties. However, in 1997, the opening of the Hokuriku Shinkansen brought a sudden end to this railway's 100-year history of service. Once the trains stopped running, the tracks became overgrown with vegetation, and the magnificent railway heritage began to quietly sink into the mountain forests. What was lost, however, was far more than physical tracks. The regional history, culture, and collective memories nurtured alongside the railway—as well as local pride—began to fade. "After the railway vanished, it felt as though time in our town had simply stopped." This was the quiet decay and sense of loss that gripped the once-thriving town.

The Turning Point: Why change was needed

Faced with the grand structures left behind as mere relics of the past, local residents and the Annaka Tourism Association (DMO) shared a growing concern that this place would eventually be forgotten. The turning point came through a series of discussions about the future of the region. For one member of the DMO, the railway held a particularly personal meaning. His grandfather had once been involved in operating locomotives on the Usui Pass line, and the railway was remembered not merely as a piece of infrastructure, but as an integral part of local life and collective memory. Through these discussions, the community arrived at a new perspective: “The true value of this place lies not in simply viewing the remaining structures, but in walking the tracks and experiencing them firsthand.” This realization led local residents and the DMO to reimagine the abandoned railway as a place to be experienced rather than merely preserved. What had once been regarded as a relic of the past began to be seen as an asset for the future. Driven by the belief that time should not stand still, the community took its first step toward action.

The Vision: What you set out to do

The vision we established was not to simply "preserve" the abandoned railway out of nostalgia, but to create a mechanism that utilizes it as a "living asset" that continuously connects people, the community, the past, and the future. Guided by this philosophy, our design approach prioritized the "immaterial experiences"—the history, human lives, and memories etched into the landscape—rather than focusing solely on the physical railway heritage as mere "objects". The goal was to create a space where travelers could immerse themselves in the region’s narrative, while local residents could rediscover the intrinsic value of their own home. These encounters, in turn, would foster new initiatives and cultivate a dedicated "relational population”. Instead of utilizing tourism merely as a tool to draw crowds from the outside, we envisioned it as a comprehensive community management system bridging local memory and future growth. This became our unique guiding principle for carving out a new future for the Usui Pass.

The Journey: How change happened

○ Phase 1: Rebirth of the Abandoned Railway as a "Walking Journey" (From Relic to Living History) The journey began with the creation of the "Haisen (Abandoned Railway) Walk," a guided, hands-on tour utilizing the decommissioned railway. A section that trains once flashed through in just 20 minutes was transformed into a half-day trek. Travelers pass through dark tunnels and cross massive bridges, all while listening to guides share the memories of a community that lived alongside the railway. By engaging the imaginations of visitors with local history and nature, the abandoned line transitioned from a passive monument into an opportunity to walk through the region's living history.

○ Phase 2: Expanding Tourism into a Conservation System (Cooperation with Forestry and Authorities) As the Haisen Walk continued, the community discovered an unexpected byproduct: having people regularly walk the tracks functioned as a patrol system, allowing for the early detection of environmental changes like fallen trees or slope failures. This insight catalyzed external collaboration, including with the Gunma Forest Management Office, establishing a framework for routine safety monitoring and environmental conservation. The project evolved from a standalone tourism event into a sustainable mechanism for protecting the mountains.

○ Phase 3: Cultivating a Connected Community (Transition to Sustainable Regional Management)

The initiative evolved further as travelers shifted from being passive consumers into a "relational population" who actively participate in track maintenance as official supporters. Today, a network of over 120 supporters sustains these activities.

Simultaneously, by sharing their stories with visitors, local residents have reclaimed a deep appreciation for their own heritage. Local students have also become involved through volunteer clean-up activities, guide support, and creative projects, gaining new opportunities to engage with the history and identity of their community.

Consequently, the Haisen Walk has cultivated not just tourists, but a new generation of caretakers. Among them are former travelers, local residents, and students who will carry these stories into the future.

We did not restore a railway; we restored the people who care for it.

The Breakthrough: What you achieved

Since its launch in 2018, the Haisen Walk has transformed an abandoned railway that had once lost its flow of people into a "living pathway" that reconnects people and place.

● The initiative continues to grow as a tourism experience. In 2025, it welcomed 2,027 participants, bringing the cumulative total to more than 12,000 visitors. Today, it generates approximately 80% of the Annaka Tourism Organization’s independent revenue, creating a sustainable economic cycle in which tourism income is reinvested into cultural preservation, human resource development, environmental conservation, and the stewardship of local assets.

● More than 120 registered supporters now participate in maintenance and conservation activities, demonstrating how visitors can evolve into active contributors to the places they once

came to explore. At the same time, local residents have become storytellers of their own heritage, while students are discovering new opportunities to learn from and engage with their community.
Yet the most significant transformation cannot be measured by numbers alone. It has taken place within the community itself. Residents who once felt that “time had stopped” after the railway closed have regained pride in their hometown by sharing its history with visitors from across Japan.
This transformation has revitalized the local community and brought new momentum to the activities of the Annaka Tourism Organization (DMO). In recent years, the initiative has also attracted growing attention from across Japan, receiving study visits and inquiries as a pioneering example of sustainable tourism that leverages regional assets.
What remains is not simply a railway, but a community of people who believe its story is still worth carrying into the future.

Reflections: What you learned and what others can learn
Initially, in an attempt to attract larger crowds, we challenged ourselves to introduce new hardware-driven attractions, such as "EV Rail Carts". However, we faced substantial hurdles regarding initial equipment investment, ongoing operational costs, and strict safety management, making it impossible to establish a sustainable model. This difficult setback taught us an invaluable lesson: revitalizing regional assets does not depend on building new facilities or introducing flashy hardware. Instead, it relies on genuinely nurturing the "relationships between people and the community" through the shared memories embedded in the location. The reason the Haisen Walk has endured for so long is because it is structured as a collaborative ecosystem where tourists, residents, and supporters co-create the region's future. We learned firsthand that sustainable tourism is not about the superficial strategy of drawing mass crowds, but about how effectively a community can expand its circle of dedicated "partners" who help sustain the land.

The Ripple Effect: Lasting impact
The challenge undertaken by Annaka City extends far beyond the rescue of a single abandoned railway; it offers a profound inspiration for the future of "retired regional assets" (such as industrial heritage and vacant facilities) worldwide. Instead of leaving these spaces as liabilities or treating them as static, frozen monuments, this approach creatively reinterprets them as ways to "walk through the region's living history," converting them into active assets for community management—a model that can be easily adapted by other destinations. Indeed, this framework—which integrates active citizen participation, environmental conservation, cultural legacy, and the generation of a relational population—is currently drawing strong attention from government bodies, DMOs, and regional organizations across Japan as an advanced model for sustainable community management. The seed planted here—to pass decommissioned spaces to the next generation and cultivate future stewards—is steadily spreading across boundaries.

Awards or Certifications

The Haisen Walk has received high acclaim from national ministries and professional institutions as a pioneering initiative that successfully synthesizes tourism, cultural legacy, landscape preservation, and regional revitalization.

2021: 25th Furusato (Hometown) Event Awards — Excellence Award
2023: Sports Culture Tourism Awards — Cultural Tourism Award
2025: 2nd JR East Regional Co-Creation Awards — Grand Prize
Multiple project selections by the Japan Tourism Agency (JTA), including:
• Sustainable Tourism Content Enhancement Model Project
• Tourism Content Business Profitability Improvement Model Project

Web Articles

https://www.jreast.co.jp/co-creation/case/0016_detail.html

https://www.mlit.go.jp/kankocho/content/001995073.pdf
（p.50-57）

https://www.mlit.go.jp/kankocho/content/810001851.pdf
（p.40-41）

Other Relevant Links

https://youtu.be/oVbdpmI1saM
（This documentary contains the voices, memories, and emotions behind our Good Practice Story. If you have time for only one additional resource, we hope it will be this one.）

Quotes or Testimonials

○ Local Resident and Senior Guide: "In 1997, when the railway closed, it felt as if our town had lost its future. The tracks remained, but the flow of people completely vanished. But today is different. The Haisen Walk brings people from all over the country who truly listen to our stories. Being able to speak about our history with pride has given me a renewed purpose in life."

○ Supporter (Former Visitor): "I originally came here simply as a tourist. But when I walked the tracks, passed through the tunnels, and looked out across the mountains from the brick bridges, I understood the value of this place for the first time. 'I want this landscape to remain for future generations.' That feeling led me to become a supporter contributing to maintenance and conservation activities. A place I once visited has become a place I feel responsible for protecting."

○ Local Student: "To be honest, I used to think there was nothing special about this area. Because I saw these landscapes every day, I never recognized their value. Through the Haisen Walk, I learned that this place holds more than a century of railway history, along with the

memories and aspirations of countless people. Now I see it differently. This is not a place with nothing. It is a place with many things worth carrying into the future.
And I want to be one of the people who help carry them forward."

[Shota Uehara, Annaka Tourism Organization (DMO)]
"While working on this project, I learned that my grandfather had once driven locomotives across Usui Pass.
I realized that local history was not something distant from my life—it was part of my own family's story.
Many believed that nothing remained beyond the end of the tracks.
But I believe a future still begins there."