Reconnecting People, Reinnovating a Craft Region

Echizen Sabae Area, Japan
General Incorporated Association SOE
Regional Areas (including counties, regions, provinces)
People & Community

Summary of Good Practice Story

Japan's Echizen-Sabae region, home to seven traditional crafts including eyewear, lacquerware and washi paper spanning 1,500 years, saw production fall to a third of former levels as a rigid wholesale system cut artisans off from consumers and their own children lost interest in inheriting the trade. Starting in 2015 as a self-funded, volunteer-run open-factory event called RENEW, a new generation of artisans invited the public directly into workshops; a single visitor's genuine admiration for a craftsman's work became a turning point that showed authentic connection could heal artisan isolation. Over six phases the initiative grew deliberately (choosing quality over scale after 2017), became a formal organisation (SOE) in 2022, and evolved into year-round industrial tourism. By 2025, RENEW had grown from 22 to 120 exhibitors and from 1,200 to 55,000 visitors, spurred the opening of 43 factory shops, and drawn 70 young people to relocate to the region. The core lesson: reconnecting makers directly with consumers restores both livelihoods and pride, turning rival craftsmen into regional partners.

Setting the Scene: Destination & context

The Echizen-Sabae region in Fukui Prefecture is home to a unique concentration of traditional industries. Within a 10km radius, 7 crafts—eyeglasses, lacquerware, washi paper, knives, textiles, tansu chests, and pottery—developed side by side, supported by clean water and a moderately humid climate.

These industries started as off-season work for farming families. Wholesalers began supplying materials and funding while artisans specialized in production. This division of labor fueled prosperity, but also left artisans dependent on wholesalers; closed off from other craftsmen and consumers, their world class techniques were hidden from those outside of the region.
During Japan's period of rapid economic growth, these industries expanded through mass production, however challenges emerged as this boom slowed. Across the country, traditional craft production areas shrank to less than one-sixth of their peak size. In Echizen-Sabae, production of eyeglasses, lacquerware, and washi paper fell to less than one-third of former levels. Few businesses pursued direct sales, branding, or industrial tourism.
"The production region is done for," artisans often said. Craftsmanship, once a source of pride and livelihood, became a profession many no longer wished to pass on to their children.

The Turning Point: Why change was needed
The crisis was not sudden ― it crept in quietly.
The first issue came from the system. The B2B system had left producers unable to directly interact with consumers, making it difficult to showcase their worth and determine product prices in a sustainable manner. This led to children of artisans' being unable to imagine a future for themselves within the crafts, and saw many of them leaving for different careers or opportunities outside of the prefecture. 1,500 years of tradition was on the verge of ending.
The second issue was the loss of civic pride. One by one workshops closed their doors. At gatherings, craftsmen often spoke of the decline of the region. They had lost the passion behind their arts, and these industries had quickly become careers that they didn't want to pass down to their children.

"The production region is done for."
The crisis could be seen in this sentiment, as a quiet acceptance of what seemed inevitable grew across the community. Echizen-Sabae's crafts had been passed down across generations for over 1,500 years. Now, for the first time, that chain appeared ready to break. The possibility that this generation would be the last was no longer unthinkable, as it was becoming a reality.

The Vision: What you set out to do
The turning point began with an unlikely encounter. A newcomer and the head of the Kawada district, who was also the president of an eyewear company, shared a simple belief: "If manufacturing does not thrive, neither will the community." This led to the guiding principle, "If it doesn't exist, create it."

A new generation of artisans also began to challenge the traditional wholesale system by launching brands of their own. In 2014, a team formed and traveled to the Factory Festival in Niigata. The experience was transformative, and for the first time, they could clearly envision a different future for Echizen-Sabae.

That vision took shape in 2015 when Kawada launched RENEW as a grass-roots, self-funded experiment in industrial tourism. Driven entirely by volunteer passion, the pilot event defied expectations, attracting 22 exhibitors and 1,200 visitors, 40% coming from outside Fukui.

Among them was a young boy from Tokyo who spent three hours mesmerized by a master's art. Our team had a revelation: genuine visitor admiration possessed the power to heal an artisan's long-standing isolation. This single interaction validated two things: the need for authentic craft tourism, and the connections between artisan and consumer being key to restoring civic pride.

The Journey: How change happened

Phase 1 (2015-2016): First Connections

RENEW started in 2015 as a small open factory event in the Kawada district. The project was almost entirely self-funded, and the venue was handmade. Despite its modest scale, 22 exhibitors and companies participated, attracting 1,200 visitors, 40% from outside Fukui Prefecture. It also sparked direct B2C contact in the production area. A young boy from Tokyo who loved eyeglasses watched the craftsmen at work for 3 hours, and his praise moved the craftsmen to tears. That single interaction became a symbol of what had been missing, and the atmosphere of the region began to change.

Phase 2 (2017): Leap Forward and the Courage to Pause

In 2017, a collaboration with Nakagawa Masashichi Shoten, an authentic Japanese crafts retailer, led to the Dai Nippon Ichi Sabae Expo. The event greatly raised awareness of both Fukui and RENEW, attracting attention from across Japan. Enthusiasm within the production area grew, and interest in job opportunities in the region also increased dramatically. Success, however, was not without challenges. Disparities in visitor numbers and sales emerged, and the burden on participating businesses intensified. Rather than pursuing growth at any cost, the team chose to pause and reflect. Choosing "quality over quantity," they concluded the collaboration and focused on strengthening the intrinsic value of the region itself.

Phase 3 (2018-2019): From One District to a Regional Movement

The project grew from Kawada to encompass Echizen City, Echizen Town, and the wider Echizen-Sabae region, bringing together artisans from 7 different industries in a large-scale, privately led effort supported by local governments. As RENEW matured, interest from visitors began translating into tangible economic impact. Factory shops opened throughout the region, supported by growing demand and public-sector initiatives. People were coming not just to observe craftsmanship, but to purchase products and engage directly with makers. Simultaneously, a new vision began to emerge: creating year-round industrial tourism and job opportunities.

Phase 4 (2020-2021): Moving Forward Amidst the Pandemic

Just as momentum was building, the COVID-19 pandemic struck, bringing with it a harsh reality: approximately 40% of traditional artisans faced the risk of going out of business by the end of the year. Government-led events were almost entirely canceled. RENEW was also on the brink of cancellation. Nevertheless, the team decided to persevere. “We hope our passion will become a beacon of light for someone.” That belief carried the production area through the crisis.

Phase 5 (2022-2025): Establishment of a Tourism and Community Development Corporation, and Evolution to Year-Round Industrial Tourism
In July 2022, RENEW transitioned into a formal organization with the establishment of the general incorporated association SOE, evolving to year-round production area tours and experiential programs. A program for newcomers also began, attracting creators, designers, and architects alike. Their fresh perspectives and innovative ideas are ushering in an era of new consumption. The growing number of diverse stakeholders also contributed to the production area emerging as a must-see travel spot.

Phase 6 (2026-): Towards a Global and Circular Production Area
Currently, Echizen-Sabae sees year-round inbound tourists, mainly from Europe and the United States, in search of authentic craftsmanship, which contributes to the growing confidence of the artisans. With the opening of SUKU, a craft inn where visitors can experience Echizen washi paper, the length of stay and spending in the region is also on the rise. And now, the focus is even further ahead ― retaining successors, cultivating washi raw materials, and recycling water resources. With these efforts, the production area is steadily building a circular system for sustainable industrial tourism.

The Breakthrough: What you achieved
Starting in 2015 with 22 exhibitors and approximately 1,200 visitors, RENEW grew to 120 exhibitors and 55,000 visitors by 2025. While the numbers were never the main goal, this growth led to a change in the mindset of the people behind the products.

This transformation can be seen throughout Echizen-Sabae. Before RENEW, factory shops were almost nonexistent. Today, there are 43. There is a movement to break away from OEM dependence, launch in-house brands, and sell directly through retail stores at their own price point. Furthermore, SUKU, a craft inn specializing in Echizen washi paper, serves as a gateway to connect people to the production area, and is steadily increasing overall stay time and spending in the region.

These changes have also led to a flow of people; 70 young people have moved to the production area, inspired by RENEW. This new generation of artisans, designers, and business staff is helping shape the future of the region. In addition, 8 shared houses have opened to

support newcomers, and the RENEW volunteer team has grown into a community of around 100 people from Japan and abroad.

However, the biggest change is in mentality. Previously, gatherings of craftsmen were filled with complaints and despair. Now, however, artisans discuss future ideas and collaborations over drinks. They have begun to see their fellow craftsmen not as competitors, but as partners in nurturing the region. The mindset of "as long as my own company survives" has shifted to "we want to revitalize the entire Echizen-Sabae area." This change wasn't prompted by anyone; it naturally developed as artisans engaged with consumers and rediscovered pride in their work.

RENEW has created a self-sustaining ecosystem that continues to encourage new opportunities throughout the region.

Reflections: What you learned and what others can learn

Quality over Quantity

As visitor numbers surged in 2017, many workshops became overwhelmed and disparities between participating businesses grew. In response, RENEW reduced its event days in 2018, ended its collaboration with Nakagawa Masashichi Shoten, and shifted its focus from visitor numbers to nurturing a deeper understanding of the region's craftsmanship.

The Importance of Organizational Structure

RENEW initially relied on volunteers and had to rebuild its operations every year. Recognizing that this model was unsustainable, SOE was established in 2022 to create a year-round management structure.

Creating a Sustainable System

As attendance grew, it became clear that large crowds often prevented meaningful interaction between artisans and visitors. Reservation systems, visitor limits, and revised pricing were introduced to encourage deeper engagement while ensuring artisans received fair compensation for their skills and time.

Government and Regional Cooperation

Cross-municipal cooperation was initially limited, with each city operating independently. RENEW helped bring local governments together around a shared vision for the production area. Transportation was another challenge, leading to the launch of the RENEW Taxi initiative, which later evolved into a government-supported taxi subsidy program. Information sharing and year-round collaboration remain ongoing challenges, but continue to be essential for sustainable tourism in Echizen-Sabae.

The Ripple Effect: Lasting impact

Echizen-Sabae is unmistakably changing.

Workshops are now welcoming visitors year-round. RENEW became a testing ground for new ideas, leading to the development of permanent content. The traditional wholesale model shifted toward direct sales, while the relationship between Echizen City and Sabae City grew closer with the development of the cities' first joint initiative, the Echizen-Sabae Design Management School.

People seeking meaningful work and lifestyles have begun relocating to the region. Universities, designers, architects, artists, and companies from all over Japan and abroad visit regularly, while collaborations with local governments and various businesses have deepened.

Overseas and domestic visitors seeking authentic crafts are flowing into Fukui, connecting to the people and places behind the products. A unique Fukui brand—ZEN × CRAFT × FOOD—is beginning to take shape, and RENEW's experience has evolved into KOGEI COMMONS, an open factory network connecting 11 production regions across Japan.

By restoring pride in craftsmanship, attracting younger generations, and strengthening connections beyond the region, the future of Echizen-Sabae lies in serving as a bridge between creators and consumers, tradition and innovation, and Japan and the world.

Awards or Certifications
2019: Good Design Award (RENEW)
2020: Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism — Regional Development Excellence Award
2023: Minister of the Environment Award — Regional Producer (Naohiro Niiyama)
2024: Tourism EXPO Japan — Special Jury Award
2025: Tourism EXPO Japan — Special Jury Award (2nd consecutive year)
2025: UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage — Echizen Washi
Japan Tourism Agency: Adopted as High-Value Inbound Tourism Content

Web Articles
https://www.g-mark.org/gallery/winners/9e1ef1e8-803d-11ed-af7e-0242ac130002?companies=ce879377-5d8b-4f90-9810-c2521f33c021&years=2019

https://www.mlit.go.jp/report/press/kokudoseisaku04_hh_000139.html

https://t-expo2023-production.s3.ap-northeast-1.amazonaws.com/wp-2023/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/26115828/tej2024_pr-2024-0826_1.pdf

https://www.t-expo.jp/_shared/pdf/tej2025_the-japan-tourism-awards-2025-winners.pdf

https://www.city.echizen.lg.jp/office/090/030/torinokoshi.html

https://www.mlit.go.jp/kankocho/kobo08_00045.html

https://www.mlit.go.jp/kankocho/content/001895706.pdf

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https://www.mlit.go.jp/kankocho/content/001727913.pdf

Other Relevant Links
https://soe.or.jp/
https://renew-fukui.com/
https://craftinvitation.jp/workshop/
https://craftinvitation.jp/suku/
https://kogeicommons.jp/
https://echizensabae-design.com/

Quotes or Testimonials
Artisan voice:
Hideaki Taki / Washi Paper Artisan
"I still remember when I saw the first RENEW poster in 2015. I went as a visitor, but in 2017, I was invited to participate in a simultaneous workshop-open-house event in Echizen City. For me, the biggest takeaway was forming connections with many fellow artisans. Now that RENEW has expanded beyond Kawada to the Echizen-Sabae area, creating a foundation for year-round tourism is something that we are working on.

Artisan voice:
Yoshinori Hayakawa / Eyeglasses Craftsman
Hayakawa begrudgingly agreed to join RENEW, all the while stating “a workshop like mine isn’t something to show people”. A glasses enthusiast came from Tokyo for the event, spending hours at Hayakawa’s workshop enamored with his work. This interaction became a turning point for Hayakawa to take on a new mindset. In a meeting after RENEW, Hayakawa cried, sharing that he was glad he participated, and that he had wished his son would have succeeded his business. If someone were to come along wanting to take over his workshop, Hayawaka says he would pass it on to them.

Newcomer voice:
Haruka Kudo / Tour Guide
“Before moving here, I participated in a program that aimed to find solutions to problems in the production area. Before joining, I thought that it was a conservative community protecting their

ways, but when I got here I was strongly captivated by the passion for the crafts and the tenacious mindset of the people behind them. I want to use English to convey this passion to people overseas," says Kudo, adding that as a guide, she wants to be a bridge to showcase the charm of the region to visitors.

Overseas visitor voice:
American Tourist
“Both young and experienced artisans working together is very appealing. In a time when things can be easily made by machine, there’s something special about things being made with care. I am excited to use the knife I purchased after seeing the artisans at work, and I think I will remember them as I use it.”