Reconnecting People with the Headwaters of the Southern Alps

Ikawa Forest, Southern Alps, Shizuoka, Japan, Japan
JUZAN Co., Ltd.
Protected Areas (including public natural or cultural parks)
Nature & Environment

Summary of Good Practice Story
In the remote headwaters of the Oi River deep in Japan's Southern Alps, the Ikawa forest has never been truly wild — it has long been sustained through daily human presence: forest maintenance, landslide monitoring and wildlife management by local communities. As populations declined and aged, this relationship quietly began weakening, with fewer people entering the mountains and subtle ecological shifts appearing. Rather than continuing conventional forest management alone, the local company leading conservation efforts began creating new ways for people — local government, researchers, businesses and visitors — to experience the headwaters firsthand, translating locally-understood values like forest stewardship and watershed connection into forms outsiders could understand and engage with directly. This gradually connected forest management, local resource use and visitor engagement into one integrated system, helping the local community rediscover pride in their headwater landscape while extending its value across the wider watershed and into urban areas. The lesson: in this landscape, nature does not sustain itself in balance on its own — protecting it and sustaining human engagement are inseparable, and progress comes through repeated small experiments and cross-sector dialogue rather than a single decisive intervention.

Setting the Scene: Destination & context
In the remote headwaters of the Oi River, deep within the Southern Alps of Japan, lies a landscape that appears untouched—but is, in fact, carefully sustained by human presence.

This mountainous region, including the Ikawa area in Shizuoka City, forms a critical water source for downstream communities, industry, and energy systems. Steep terrain, fragile geology, and heavy rainfall make the ecosystem both highly dynamic and inherently unstable.

For generations, local communities have lived alongside this environment, maintaining forests, monitoring landslides, and managing wildlife as part of their daily lives. The forest here is not simply “natural”—it is a lived-in landscape, shaped by continuous human engagement.

However, as populations decline and communities age, this relationship is beginning to weaken. Without daily human interaction, forests become less managed, wildlife populations shift, and the ecological balance that once sustained the region starts to erode.

This story unfolds in a place where nature does not remain in equilibrium on its own—
but depends on the presence, knowledge, and actions of people.

The Turning Point: Why change was needed
For generations, the forests of Ikawa were sustained through a quiet, everyday relationship between people and the land.

Over time, that relationship began to shift. As fewer people entered the mountains, small changes appeared—more wildlife, subtle shifts in vegetation. While our company continued to manage the forest, something less visible was changing.

A quiet realisation emerged: what had once been sustained through human presence might no longer continue in the same way.

The Vision: What you set out to do
Recognising this shift, our company took the first step to rethink how the relationship between people and the forest could be sustained.

Rather than maintaining the forest in the same way as before, we set out to explore a new approach—one that reconnects people with the headwaters and redefines human engagement as an essential part of the ecosystem.

Our vision was not simply to manage the forest, but to sustain the relationship that allows it to exist.

The Journey: How change happened

We began by rethinking the forest not simply as something to be managed, but as a place sustained through relationships with people. Rather than relying only on conventional forest management, we recognised the need to create new ways for people to remain connected to this headwater landscape.

The first step was to make the value of the forest more visible and shareable. What had long been understood locally—forest stewardship, water protection, and the wider watershed connection—had to be translated into forms that could be understood by people beyond the region. Gradually, new opportunities for dialogue and firsthand experience began to emerge.

This process did not remain within our company. Local government, researchers, businesses, and visitors all became part of the effort. Each brought different perspectives, but by standing together in the headwaters and experiencing the forest, water, terrain, and human presence firsthand, a shared understanding slowly began to form.

What became clear was that, in this region, protecting nature cannot be separated from sustaining human engagement. The forest does not remain in balance on its own; the relationship itself must be continuously renewed. For this reason, we began to reconnect forest management, the use of local resources, and opportunities for people to experience the place as part of one living system.

This transformation did not happen through a single decision. It took shape through repeated conversations, small experiments, and collaboration across sectors. What we sought was not simply to add new activities, but to carry forward the relationships that this landscape needs in order to endure.

The Breakthrough: What you achieved

Through these efforts, a new relationship between people and nature in the headwaters has begun to take shape.

The value of the forest—once understood mainly within the local community—is now being shared more widely across the watershed and with people living in urban areas. Through on-site experiences and dialogue, visitors are beginning to see nature not only as something to protect, but as something to engage with.

At the same time, forest management, the use of local resources, and visitor engagement are no longer separate activities, but are gradually becoming connected as part of one integrated system. This has opened up new possibilities for balancing environmental conservation with the long-term sustainability of the region.

For the local community, increased interaction with external actors has created opportunities to re-examine their long-standing relationship with the mountains. For visitors, being present in the headwaters has become a way to experience their own connection to nature.

The destination is now evolving—from a place of forest management into a place where relationships between people and nature are actively reimagined.

Reflections: What you learned and what others can learn

One of the most important lessons from this initiative was how fragile the relationship between people and nature actually is. In this region, the forest does not sustain itself without human engagement—it depends on it.

At the beginning, we believed that continuing forest management and communicating its value would be sufficient. However, we learned that unless opportunities for people to engage with the landscape are intentionally created, that relationship cannot be maintained. Protecting nature and sustaining human involvement are inseparable.

We also learned that efforts confined within the local community have limits. New possibilities only began to emerge when external perspectives and participation were introduced. At the same time, bringing together diverse stakeholders required continuous dialogue to bridge differences in values and expectations.

For others starting a similar journey, it is important not to aim for a complete solution from the outset. Progress comes through small experiments and ongoing dialogue. Most importantly, the focus should not only be on protecting nature, but on sustaining the relationship between people and nature over time.

The Ripple Effect: Lasting impact

Through this initiative, the relationship between people and nature in the headwaters is beginning to be recognised not only as a local matter, but as something to be shared across the wider watershed and with people living in urban areas.

By bringing together diverse actors—companies, local government, researchers, and visitors—connections are forming between efforts that once existed separately, opening new possibilities for collaboration. At the same time, increased external engagement is helping the local community rediscover the value of the region and develop a renewed sense of pride in its role as a headwater landscape.

While this process is still ongoing, the idea of viewing forest management, watershed sustainability, and human engagement as one integrated system is beginning to resonate beyond the region.

This place is gradually transforming—from a site of conservation into a place where new relationships between people and nature are being explored. From the headwaters, this way of thinking continues to spread quietly outward.

Awards or Certifications
Good Life Award – Special Jury Award (Sustainable Design Award), Ministry of the Environment, Japan
EcoPro Awards – Minister of Finance Award, Japan

Web Articles
https://www.shizugin-smc.jp/case/juzan

https://dearwhisky.com/distillery/ikawa/

https://www.xn--qcktg763n.com/entry/ikawadistillery

https://www.tt-paper.co.jp/app/files/uploads/2025/03/20250331_info.pdf

https://www.shizuoka-fg.co.jp/news-release/20250203_XaX/250203_NR1.pdf

https://juzan.co.jp/

Other Relevant Links
https://juzan.co.jp/

https://x.com/juzan_ikawa

https://www.instagram.com/p/DJsSCd1NszA/

Quotes or Testimonials
“This forest is not simply protected—it is supported by people.”