From Tourists to Teammates: Ishinomaki’s Participatory Regenerative Tourism

Ishinomaki City, Japan
Ishinomaki City
Local Destinations (including villages, cities, municipalities, islands)
People & Community



Summary of Good Practice Story
Post-disaster Ishinomaki, a Japanese fisheries and farming city recovering from the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, faced steep population decline (down almost 20% since 2010) and a sharp seasonal imbalance in visitors. Rather than simply chasing visitor numbers, the city reframed tourism around turning visitors into "teammates" who engage directly in local regeneration: a Fishermen's School and student fisheries programme, social-firm agriculture on abandoned farmland, forest-thinning projects linking mountains to the sea, and immersive fishing-village experiences. Coordinated by the city, its DMO and travel partners, these programmes helped 65 people enter the fisheries sector, 56 into agriculture, and drew over 1,600 people into forest stewardship, while rebuilding a tsunami-hit village with 800 volunteers. The core lesson: presenting local challenges as entry points for genuine participation, rather than problems to hide, builds lasting visitor-community relationships and restores civic pride.

Setting the Scene: Destination & context
Located in northeastern Miyagi Prefecture, Ishinomaki is one of Japan’s leading fisheries cities. It faces the Sanriku-Kinkasan offshore fishing grounds, one of the world’s three richest fishing grounds where about 250 species of seafood are caught each year. The city also has a thriving agricultural sector, supported by plentiful water resources and fertile land. Its diverse products

include Sasanishiki rice and Kahoku Seri, a Japanese parsley registered under Japan's Geographical Indication (GI) protection system, and high-quality tomatoes grown through advanced ICT-based cultivation management.

Ishinomaki suffered severe damage during the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake.Through the recovery process, recovery efforts, while continuing to live alongside the power of nature, a spirit of mutual aid and openness to welcoming volunteers and newcomers from outside the region took root in the community.

For Ishinomaki, fisheries and agriculture are not merely industries. They are part of the region's culture, a source of local pride, and wisdom for living in harmony with nature. Therefore, losing these livelihoods due to population decline and a shortage of successors is a serious issue not only economically, but also because it threatens the region's identity.

The Turning Point: Why change was needed

In 2010, Ishinomaki had a population of 160,826. By the end of April 2026, it had fallen to 129,169. (decrease of 31,657 people, or about 19.7%). This decline has led directly to a shortage of talent to support local industries and pass regional culture on to the next generation.

Conventional tourism policies had generally focused on increasing visitor numbers. However, Ishinomaki faced a clear seasonal imbalance because many events and visitors were concentrated in summer, while winter remained relatively inactive. According to the city's monthly visitor statistics, Ishinomaki received 739,137 visitors in August 2024, compared to 270,080 in February, a difference of 469,057 visitors. As population decline and winter inactivity overlapped, a sense of stagnation spread in the community, along with growing sentiment that "perhaps there is nothing left in Ishinomaki" and raised concerns about declining civic pride.

Under these circumstances, we came to believe that the real challenge was not simply the increase or decrease of visitor numbers, but how to address the shortage of people supporting the region and how to turn visitors into people who build ongoing relationships with the community, or "teammates." This became the starting point for redefining tourism as a way to discover local value together and nurture people who could help shape Ishinomaki's future.

The Vision: What you set out to do

We aimed to create tourism that welcomes visitors not as mere consumers, but as "Teammates" who engage with Ishinomaki's issues and possibilities. Rather than focusing only on "seeing" and "doing," we sought to shift toward "engaging with the community": experiencing livelihoods and values, and thinking with local people about the future. Through this approach, we pursued participatory regenerative tourism, where visitors help in post-disaster recovery, coexistence with nature, environmental improvement, and social renewal.

At the heart of this vision is “involving” visitors in the region’s regenerative cycle. Lacking successors due to population decline, seasonal employment instability, and the local economy were opened up as entry points for visitors to learn, take part, and think about the future with local people.

Visitors deepen their relationship with the region not by consuming it, but by participating in the regeneration of fisheries, agriculture, forests, nature, and local communities. Meanwhile the region rediscovers its value through collaboration with people from outside and becomes an active force shaping its future. Through this model, we aimed to turn visitors into teammates who build ongoing relationships with the community, while restoring civic pride.

The Journey: How change happened

This change began in post-disaster Ishinomaki, where practitioners in fisheries, agriculture, forests, and nature and community settings continued to take action while facing their own regional challenges. The process of connecting and developing these practices is the process of Ishinomaki’s “Participatory Regenerative Tourism,” a model for involving visitors in local regeneration.

In order to address the serious labor shortage in the fisheries sector, Ishinomaki has cooperated since 2015 with a group that advocates for the future of fisheries under the slogan “classy, profitable, and innovative" establishing a system to welcome new talent into the sector. Examples of this system include the Fishermen’s School, where participants can experience hands-on fisheries work and coastal life; and through SUGYOI Baito, a program for high school students to gain firsthand experience in fisheries. These are not systems for recruiting temporary workers from outside, but rather for welcoming new teammates who can help build the region’s future.

In the agriculture sector, local agriculture based on the Social Firm concept reuses abandoned farmland for hop cultivation and other activities, while creating a space that welcomes people of various backgrounds into agriculture. Participation from travelers and those who wish to migrate helps revitalize abandoned land and creates new value in the region.

In the forestry sector, abandoned forest plantations pose a risk to the environment. In response, locals have been initiating projects to promote forest management that leaves a positive impact on the sea. These projects create opportunities for visitors to be directly involved in forest thinning and the utilization of unused natural resources. By participating in these projects, visitors gain hands-on experience and learn about the relationship between forests, rivers, and the sea, while actively contributing to the regeneration of the local environment.

Moreover, in nature and community settings, hands-on experience programs have been developed in small fishing villages, allowing visitors to learn comprehensively about the

environment, local lifestyle, and food. Visitors learn about natural resources and the livelihoods of people through exchanges with local residents, cuisine, and experiences, to deepen their connection with the community.

Common between these initiatives are that they do not shy away from the problems of the region; but rather, openly allow visitors to learn from it, let them take action as an entry point for engagement with the local people. Ishinomaki city supports fisheries, agriculture, and other sectors; and also cooperates with the local Destination Management Organization (DMO) and a travel company to develop a comprehensive educational travel program that integrates hands-on experience. These programs become a bridge to 'turning visitors into teammates' and 'nurture hands that will support the region's future.'

The Breakthrough: What you achieved

Our breakthrough was transforming visitors from one-time travelers into “teammates” who build ongoing relationships with the community, creating a new cycle among local industries, communities, and tourism.

In fisheries, initiatives since 2015 helped 65 people find employment in Ishinomaki’s fisheries sector by FY2025. The Fishermen’s School welcomed 70 participants, and SUGYOI Baito, a program for high school students, welcomed 162 participants. These programs became entry points for younger generations to connect coastal work with their future careers.

In agriculture, 56 people found employment or transitional work, and 15 joined rural exchange programs in FY2024. Farmland now produces food while providing roles for diverse people and creating a space to reconnect with the region.

In forestry, 1,620 people joined a circular community that protects the mountains and sea, and the initiative received the Minister of the Environment Award. In nature and community settings, a tsunami-damaged fishing village, once reduced to two households and five residents, restored a century-old house with 800 volunteers. It once attracted 15,000 visitors annually, but today values local life, identity, and ongoing relationships over visitor numbers.

This approach to creating entry points for engagement has spread beyond individual fields to the city center. Under the vision of “a town with entry points for engagement,” revitalization efforts are being promoted. Ishinomaki City, the local DMO, and travel companies have cooperated to create hands-on programs and educational tours where visitors enter local workplaces, learn, and take part.

The result is mutual change: visitors become teammates, while the community co-creates value with people from outside.

Reflections: What you learned and what others can learn
Our greatest lesson was that local issues are not mere problems that "need to be overcome"; but rather, they are opportunities for entry points for engagement to build connections with people beyond borders.

First, tourism resources as a "work-in-progress" sustain engagement better than "finished products". Joining fisheries work, contributing to revitalizing agricultural lands, preparing forests, and experiencing coastal life are not simply activities. Visitors contribute to the region's transformation then gain a sense of attachment.

Second, hands-on experiences are important in inspiring repeated visits and engagement. This flow of [visit, learn, take part, connect with locals, revisit] turns visitors into teammates.

Third, regional change is not solely the government's role, but also the role of private and community actors with hands-on experience. The government and local DMO should connect diverse practices, refine them into educational programs, and develop a comprehensive model.

Other regions facing population decline, labor shortages, industrial decline, and weakening civic pride can also apply this model. The key is not to separate local issues from tourism, but rather include them as entry points for engagement. Ishinomaki demonstrates how tourism can address local issues while nurturing teammates who build ongoing relationships with the community.

The Ripple Effect: Lasting impact
The ripple effects go beyond economic impact and are beginning to reshape Ishinomaki's social structure.

First, the participation model emerging from primary industries has spread to other fields, forming a network of local engagement. More than 90 Ishinomaki Local Food Promotion Shops serve local ingredients, and restaurants also share producers' and regional stories.

Second, through interactive experiences, one-time visitors become teammates engaged in Ishinomaki's future.

Third, these initiatives have reached education and research. Ishinomaki as a whole functions as a "Learning Destination" for solving social issues. Several fields have had notable success: fisheries had approximately 609 visitors from businesses, educational organizations, government bodies, and international groups; agriculture had 30 companies and 120 individuals accepted within a year; and forestry welcomed 590 participants in training programs and outreach lectures related to environmental initiatives. Visitors learn about post-disaster recovery, coexistence with nature, revitalizing primary industries.

Ishinomaki is evolving into a model of regional regeneration based on relationships, perpetuating a cycle of problem-solving, learning, economic activity, environmental conservation, and civic pride.

Awards or Certifications
[Fisheries: Fisherman Japan（漁業分野：一般社団法人フィッシャーマン・ジャパン）]

・2024: Social Entrepreneur Award, 31st Tohoku New Business Awards
・2016: Encouragement Award, 8th Regional Revitalization Awards
・2021: Fisheries Innovation Award, Japan Creation Award

[Agriculture: Ishinomaki Farm（農業分野：一般社団法人イシノマキ・ファーム）]
・Selected as one of the 10th “Discover Mura no Takara” areas by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries
https://www.discovermuranotakara.com/sentei/select10/no04/

[Forests and Environment: Momonowa LLC（森林・環境分野：合同会社もものわ）]
・13th Good Life Award, Minister of the Environment Award, Regional Community Category
https://goodlifeaward.env.go.jp/report/583/
・Excellence Award, 5th Kita-Nippon Bank New Business Contest
https://www.kitagin.co.jp/business_contest/

[Nature and Community: Hamanone（自然・コミュニティ分野：一般社団法人はまのね）]
・8th Ishinomaki Award
・Grand Prize, 2nd Ishinomaki Startup Business Grand Prix
・Excellence Award, 8th Light of Japan’s Reconstruction Award
・Good Design Award 2015, for Venison Can
・Excellence Award, Bungeishunju 100th Anniversary SDGs Essay Award

Web Articles
[Fisheries]
・Used as supporting evidence for the following figures: 65 people employed in the fisheries sector by the end of FY2025, 70 cumulative participants in the Fishermen’s School, 162 cumulative participants in SUGYOI Baito, and approximately 609 cumulative participants in study visits and training programs.
・Fisheries Workforce Development Project - Ishinomaki City
https://www.city.ishinomaki.lg.jp/cont/10453000/0005/ninaite.html
・Fisherman Japan official website https://fishermanjapan.com/
・SUGYOI Baito note article
https://note.com/fishermanjapan/n/n5bba4ec4c39b

[Agriculture]
・Used as supporting evidence for the following figures: 56 people connected to employment or intermediate work opportunities, 15 participants in rural study programs, and 30 companies and 120 participants accepted through human resource development training and study tours.
https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/thmjoaapyg0ugoy0mxp0z/.pptx.pdf?rlkey=hwriuopocb8rb31r9srtu4edb&st=qb5l6407&dl=0
・Ishinomaki Farm official website　https://ishinomaki-farm.com/

[Forests and Environment]
・Building a Circular Forest Management System to Protect Human Lives and the Marine Environment
Used as supporting evidence for 1,620 cumulative people involved and 590 cumulative participants in training programs and outreach lectures that foster active involvement in forests.
https://goodlifeaward.env.go.jp/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/kankyodaizin10.pdf
・FY2025 Project to Build Support Systems for Regional Circular and Ecological Spheres
https://chiikijunkan.env.go.jp/assets/pdf/tsukuru/senteidantai/2025/705_momonowa.pdf
・Momonowa LLC official website　https://momonowainfo.wixsite.com/momonowa

[Nature and Community]
・Used as supporting evidence that approximately 800 volunteers from across Japan took part in restoring an old traditional house, and that the initiative developed into a place for learning and exchange where visitors could experience local livelihoods and ways of life.
https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/p07v3w7u8v2gm0gj4ayun/.pdf?rlkey=nrg7p6mxielxsag6ici89ozf0&st=e14v7baa&dl=0
・ Hamaguri-do note article　https://note.com/hamaguridou/n/nb6ecb4f771e9
・Hamanone / Hamaguri-do official website　https://www.hamaguridou.com/

[Learning Programs and Regional Partnerships]
・Used as supporting evidence for experiential learning programs developed by the regional DMO.（一般社団法人石巻圏域観光推進機構）
https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/2ce6tv105xmu8uoaxbgwq/DMO.pdf?rlkey=44ey37lgyq2es21k22yfow8a5&st=k0xkeuj4&dl=0
・Used as supporting evidence for educational trips, study tours, and regional revitalization initiatives promoted under the comprehensive partnership agreement between Ishinomaki City and Nippon Travel Agency.（株式会社日本旅行）
https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/4fe2utyvc3f2g14qfwpy8/2025.pdf?rlkey=olq8l8ks7opk9evsvdiigmind&st=jm6h34c9&dl=0
・Used as supporting evidence for projects promoting city center revitalization based on the area vision “a town with entry points for engagement.”（株式会社街づくりまんぼう）
https://ishinomaki-areaplatform.jp/

・Machizukuri Manbow official website　https://man-bow.net/

Other Relevant Links

・Ishinomaki Local Food Promotion Shops - Ishinomaki City
https://www.city.ishinomaki.lg.jp/cont/10452000b/-kanko2/20231127112549.html
・Ishinomaki Monthly Visitor Statistics
Chapter 11: Commerce, Tourism, and Finance - Ishinomaki City
https://www.city.ishinomaki.lg.jp/cont/10181000/0040/3914/20130301161107.html
・Ishinomaki Organic Village Declaration - Ishinomaki City
https://www.city.ishinomaki.lg.jp/cont/10454000/20260206/2026020610.html
・Ishinomaki City SDGs Future City Plan, Phase 3 - Ishinomaki City
https://www.city.ishinomaki.lg.jp/cont/10051050/1000/0200/20200827180103.html
・Ishinomaki Zero Carbon City Declaration - Ishinomaki City
https://www.city.ishinomaki.lg.jp/cont/10301000/zerocarbon/20240219115935.html
・Official Instagram account （@visit_ishinomaki）
https://www.instagram.com/visit_ishinomaki/

Quotes or Testimonials

From participants in fisheries experiences:

“My desire to work with these people grew stronger over time, and I decided to return to Ishinomaki.”

“Fishers are truly cool. The more I learned about them, the more curious I became.”

From participants in agriculture experiences:

“I was interested in the fact that work experience is offered through agriculture, and it became an opportunity for me to think about how I could engage with the community and society.”

“I felt the comfort of the sea, rivers, and fields where crops grow, and it made me want to visit again and experience them.”

From a participant in a forest experience:

“I had not paid much attention to the mountains before, but I realized that forest issues are connected to our own lives and to the marine environment. It became an opportunity for me to think about what I could do.”

From local hosts:



“I believe the region is full of unpolished gems. If we polish them, they can become treasures that lead to tourism resources and learning opportunities for visitors.”

“If we continue co-creating without losing these two-way relationships, visitors will become involved as members of the community, and I believe the region may become even better than it was before the disaster.”

From high school students who joined a study tour:

“I felt that there are small connections even among things we cannot see, such as fisheries and seafood processing, the sea and the mountains, and people’s thoughts and feelings. I thought it was important to increase and make use of those connections.”

“In the future, I want to be the one who takes action to create those connections.”