Developing a Universal Beach through collaboration among diverse stakeholders

Kamaishi City, Japan
Kamaishi DMC Co., Ltd.
Local Destinations (including villages, cities, municipalities, islands)
People & Community

Summary of Good Practice Story
Nebama Beach in Kamaishi City, Japan, was restored and reopened in 2021 after the 2011 tsunami destroyed it, but families of children with disabilities pointed out it remained a place where "only people without disabilities can enjoy the ocean," lacking any infrastructure for safe accessible swimming. Starting in 2022, a local community group of mothers of disabled children partnered with the DMO (Kamaishi DMC) and an NPO providing funding and safety expertise, running trial inclusive tourism programmes while securing equipment like amphibious wheelchairs, safety training from lifeguards, and cross-sector role divisions between community, DMO and NPO. After a 2024 trial was cancelled by typhoon, the first Universal Beach event finally launched in August 2025, welcoming 25 people from seven families supported by 35 staff and volunteers from NPOs, campgrounds, lifesaving clubs and local government. Participating families said they'd never imagined swimming together as a whole family before. The lesson: sustainable, inclusive tourism depends on engaging diverse partners as equal contributors — funding, safety and venue expertise together — and on shifting community mindset toward believing barriers can be removed with a little ingenuity.

Setting the Scene: Destination & context

Nebama Beach in Kamaishi City, Iwate Prefecture, is located in the middle of the Sanriku Coast in northern Japan. It features a beautiful sandy beach stretching 1.3km and used to attract about 78,000 beachgoers annually. However, the massive tsunami caused by the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake washed away most of the beach and destroyed the surrounding facilities. Since the disaster, Kamaishi City has worked in collaboration with the local community to attract visitors from both within and outside the city, aiming to establish the area as a hub for sustainable tourism.

At the same time, Kamaishi City's infrastructure for enabling people with disabilities and their families to enjoy the ocean together remained inadequate. For Kamaishi, which aspires to be an "open city" that welcomes people of all backgrounds, making the Nebama seaside a "place where everyone can enjoy themselves safely" is a critical challenge for the local community.

The Turning Point: Why change was needed

In 2021, Kamaishi City restored the sandy beach lost in the massive tsunami and reopened the public beach. However, while Nebama beach has regained its vibrant atmosphere, it remains a place where "only people without disabilities can enjoy the ocean", falling far short of the sustainable community Kamaishi City aims to create.

Meanwhile, we received feedback from a local mother raising a child with a disability, "I want my child to play at the local beach, but the environment is not set up for them to play safely.", "I truly want to invite families with children with disabilities to come play at the Kamaishi coast, but the facilities are not in place."

However, Nebama beach did not have the necessary infrastructure to accommodate people with disabilities at the swimming area. Consequently, the local community and the DMO (Kamaishi DMC Co., Ltd.) took action to create a universal beach in order to change the situation.

The Vision: What you set out to do

The goal of this project is to create a beach where everyone, regardless of disability, can enjoy themselves safely. The first to take action were local community group comprising mothers of children with disabilities and the DMO (Kamaishi DMC Co., Ltd.).

This team launched the project in 2022 and organized tourism programs several times a year that people with and without disabilities could experience together. Subsequently, while examining the necessary infrastructure and budget for creating a universal beach and ensuring sustainable operations, they simultaneously worked to foster understanding among local residents.

By establishing a division of roles, a "local community involving diverse stakeholders," a "DMO to manage the project," and an "NPO providing funding and expertise" and by engaging the local government, they were able to launch the initiative in earnest.

The Journey: How change happened

１. Project Launch

As a first step in the project, we set a goal of holding an annual “Universal Beach Experience Event”.

To realize a universal beach, we need to purchase equipment such as amphibious wheelchair, implement safety measures, and train instructors to teach the necessary skills. Recognizing that “funding” and “ensuring the safety” are the key challenges of the Universal Project, we created a roadmap to address these issues and set out to realize the Kamaishi Universal Beach Project in 2024.

２．Solving Problems

We were able to make progress on financial challenges by utilizing donations and grants received by the NPO.

Additionally, regarding safety concerns, we secured the cooperations of organizations in other regions that are already implementing universal beaches, as well as local lifeguards. Furthermore, the local community worked together to enhance safety by having project members attend safety training and lectures on equipment use prior to the event. Strong collaboration among the local community, the DMO, and the NPO significantly advanced the project.

３．A shift in mindset spreading throughout the community

The first Universal Beach trial event was canceled due to a typhoon. However, the project members remained enthusiastic about holding the event the following year. After making various adjustments, they were able to successfully host the first Universal Beach event in August 2025.

On the day of the event, representatives from NPO, the DMO, the local community, the local lifesaving club, volunteers, and the local government came together to support the event.

Participating families shared their thoughts saying, “Until now, we never imagined we could all go into the ocean together, our child with a disability and their siblings, so we are very happy today.” and “Going out is usually so difficult that we always gave up. We are glad we took the plunge and came today.”

In addition, the local residents and staff who provided support were able to reaffirm the significance of this project and the importance of improving the environment as a tourist destination.

The Breakthrough: What you achieved

The event held in August 2025 was attended by 25 people from seven families, and 35 staff members from NPO, campgrounds, lifesaving clubs, local communities, and government agencies worked together to support its operation. This collaboration laid the foundation for a safe, universally accessible beach and established a robust system of cooperation.

The greatest achievement of this project was the creation of a “tourism destination where no one is excluded” through this collaboration. Furthermore, a profound shift in mindset emerged among stakeholders and local residents, the realization that “barriers can be eliminated with a little ingenuity”. As this “mindset of supporting those directly involved” has taken root in the community, the Universal Beach Project had evolved beyond a one-time event, fostering a strong desire to continue the project in the coming years.

Reflections: What you learned and what others can learn

The most important lesson learned from this project was the importance of engaging a diverse range of partners. Everyone from the NPO responsible for fundraising and medical support, to the DMO providing the venue, the lifeguards ensuring safety, and the local government supporting them, served as equal partners, each contributing their unique strengths.

Furthermore, by raising the entire community’s “awareness of diversity”, we were able to promote the participation of people with disabilities in tourism, a group that had previously faced barriers to inclusion. A system that involves diverse organizations with different areas of expertise and clearly defines their respective roles it key to building sustainable community.

The Ripple Effect: Lasting impact

Building on this project, we organized a universal tour in the fall of 2025 that incorporated hands-on local fisherman experiences and fish filleting. Rather than letting it end as a one-off event like the “Universal Beach Event,” we elevated it into a form of sustainable tourism centered on nature and cultural experiences. This gave the project stakeholders and local residents the confidence that “our efforts are changing society.”

In Kamaishi City, the population decline has led to a shortage of local workers, making it increasingly difficult for a single business operator to implement new projects on their own. However, as demonstrated by this project, collaboration among businesses with different strengths to create new value is the most essential element for sustainable community development.

Awards or Certifications

Web Articles

Turning Nebama into a “Universal Beach”: Supporting Children with Disabilities at the Beach—A Step Toward Making Their Dreams Come True; Initiative Launched in Kamaishi

https://en-trance.jp/news/kamaishishinbun-news/45490.html

Other Relevant Links

Revitalizing Coastal Communities: First “Marine Industry” Pilot Tour for Families of Children with Disabilities Held in Hakozaki and Nebama, Kamaishi

https://en-trance.jp/news/kamaishishinbun-news/46453.html

Quotes or Testimonials

1. Participant: feedback from a parent of a child with Down syndrome
“I had always felt that it was difficult for our family alone to support our child, who had never been able to enjoy swimming in a pool or playing at the beach before. Also, when we were around typically developing children, I sometimes found myself comparing them, but at the Universal Beach, those feelings disappeared, and both my child and I were able to enjoy ourselves wholeheartedly.”

2. Comments from a staff member of a partner organization
“As a both a parent of a child with a disability and a project member, I believe that by involving diverse stakeholders, as we did this time, and including people with disabilities and their supporters as part of the project team, we can work toward the sustainable realization of Universal Beach.”