The People Behind the Landscape: How Miyama Reimagined Tourism to Sustain a Living Satoyama

Miyama, Japan
Kyoto Miyama Tourism Association
Local Destinations (including villages, cities, municipalities, islands)
People & Community

Summary of Good Practice Story
Miyama, a forested Satoyama region north of Kyoto known for its thatched-roof (Kayabuki) villages, had run community-based tourism for over 30 years but suffered from fragmented products, scarce data and overlapping organisations as depopulation intensified. Local businesses, residents and the municipality spent over a year building consensus to form a unified Destination Management Organisation (DMO) in 2016, using transparent monthly newsletters and resident interviews to shift tourism planning from something "done to" residents to something built with them. Interviews revealed visitors were most drawn to the people sustaining Satoyama life, so the DMO developed homestays and cultural-exchange experiences rooted in everyday skills. By 2024 this produced 15+ community tourism products, 21 trained local guides, growth from zero to about USD 300,000 in annual sales (75%+ returning to the community), and a renewed community pride in traditions once considered merely ordinary. The advice to others: start with people, not products, and invest early in data and trust.

Setting the Scene: Destination & context
Miyama lies in the mountains north of central Kyoto where 96% of the 340 km² area is covered by forest. For over thousand years, people have lived here in harmony with nature, maintaining a traditional Satoyama landscape through farming, forestry, fishery and communal stewardship.

Satoyama is known as traditional countryside landscape in Japan where the environment and landscape are maintained through human interventions. Miyama is best known for its traditional Japanese thatched-roof houses (Kayabuki). One of its areas was designated as an Important Preservation Districts for Groups of Historic Buildings in1993, and local thatchers continue to preserve the culture that sustains these iconic buildings.
What makes Miyama distinctive is not only its landscape, but the people who actively maintain it and feel responsible for passing it on to future generation. The people in Miyama share their satoyama lifestyle with visitors through community-led tourism initiatives since the 1990s with a collaboration of local residents and local tourism stakeholders in private and public sector.

The Turning Point: Why change was needed
For more than 30 years, Miyama promoted community-based tourism. Residents, guides, businesses, and municipal government worked together to develop tourism experiences, train local guides, listed their cultural and natural assets. These efforts successfully increased visitor number and tourism opportunities. Despite these achievements challenges remained. Visitor spending was limited, and tourism products were fragmented and insufficiently managed. Reliable tourism data was scarce, making it difficult to evaluate impacts and make informed decisions.
The turning point came as population decline and labour shortages intensified. Multiple tourism-related organisations operated within the region, resulting in overlapping responsibilities among board members and staff. Community leaders recognised that the existing structure was no longer sustainable. There was a growing concern that valuable local knowledge, leadership capacity, and momentum for sustainable tourism could be lost if action was not taken.
At the same time, Japan introduced its Destination Management Organisation (DMO) registration system, providing an opportunity to rethink local governance. The proposal generated debate, particularly regarding organisational restructuring and investment in professional staff. However, through extensive dialogue and consensus-building, stakeholders agreed that a unified organisation was essential to maintain both the community and the Satoyama landscape it sustains.

The Vision: What you set out to do
Residents were concerned about depopulation, labour shortages, and the future of their life. The community recognised an urgent need for a more effective structure to manage sustainable tourism. The initiative began when tourism businesses, community leaders, and the municipal government formed a preparation committee to explore the creation of a DMO. Following more than a year of consultation and planning, a community-led organisation was established in 2016. The ultimate aim was to support local businesses, develop strong network with diverse stakeholders, including foresty, fishery and transport, and safeguard the Satoyama landscape and traditions that define Miyama.
They wanted tourism to become a tool for community resilience and cultural preservation. The vision was to transform tourism from a collection of individual activities into a coordinated

destination strategy rooted in local identity. Although visitor numbers were increasing, tourism-related information remained fragmented. Tourism products were limited, and opportunities for visitors to engage deeply with the community were often missed.
Through the establishment of a DMO, the community sought to create meaningful visitor experiences while ensuring that tourism benefits remained within the community.

The Journey: How change happened
Transforming Miyama's tourism sector was not simply a matter of creating a new organisation. It was a gradual process of building trust, listening carefully, and shaping a shared vision for how tourism could support the future of the community.
The process began before the establishment of the DMO, through workshops and seminars involving residents, local businesses, community groups, and the municipality. These meetings were important because tourism in Miyama has long been closely connected to daily life. The thatched-roof village, Satoyama landscape, and traditional knowledge are not just tourism resources; they are part of people's homes, memories, and identities. Therefore, any transformation had to begin with dialogue.
At the beginning, some residents questioned whether a new tourism organisation was necessary. Others were concerned about the cost of hiring dedicated staff or whether tourism development would increase the burden on local people. For many residents, tourism was something that happened to them, rather than something happened with them. One of our first challenges was to show that the DMO was not created to promote tourism for its own sake, but to manage it in a way that protects Miyama's landscape, supports local livelihoods, and strengthens the community.
To build trust, we focused on transparency. We introduced a monthly newsletter to share visitor trends, project updates, and tourism data. By sharing information regularly, residents could understand what was happening, why certain actions were being taken, and how tourism decisions were connected to local issues. At the same time, we conducted interviews with residents, visitors, host families, local organisations, and community groups. These conversations revealed an important insight. Visitors were attracted to Miyama's thatched-roof houses and Satoyama scenery, but many were more interested in the people who sustain this way of life. They wanted to hear personal stories, understand local customs, and experience the rhythm of everyday life. This discovery changed our approach to tourism development.
Rather than creating experiences only from a tourism perspective, we began asking residents what parts of their daily lives, skills, and knowledge they felt proud of or wanted to pass on. Through this process, new experiences were developed around local lifestyles, including homestay, cultural exchanges, and opportunities to learn from local people. These were not staged performances, but small, authentic encounters rooted in Miyama's living culture.
There were surprises along the way. Some residents who were initially hesitant began to see visitors not only as tourists, but as people genuinely interested in learning from Miyama. Host families, in particular, discovered that welcoming visitors could bring new energy into their homes. One host family reflected that the programme had become "a valuable international

learning experience for our children.” This small comment captured a larger shift. Tourism was beginning to create value not only for visitors, but also for local families and younger generations.
Partnerships made this transformation possible. The municipality, local businesses, accommodation providers, community groups, schools, and residents each played a role. The DMO acted as a coordinator, connecting these actors, collecting and sharing data, supporting product development, and helping local voices become part of tourism planning. We also began using data more actively to understand visitor trends, improve decision-making, and manage tourism in a way that reduces pressure on the community.
The transformation is still ongoing. However, the most meaningful change has been the gradual shift in community attitudes. Through dialogue, transparency, data, and small-scale collaboration, residents have become more than passive recipients of tourism. They have become hosts, storytellers, partners, and decision-makers in shaping Miyama’s future.

The Breakthrough: What you achieved
Through extensive collaboration with local residents and stakeholders, more than 15 community-based tourism products were created, including educational homestay experiences rooted in Miyama’s Satoyama culture. The DMO registered as a travel agency in 2017 and began marketing and selling local tourism products. 21 local guides were also trained, enabling visitors to connect more meaningfully with the people, traditions, and landscapes that sustain the destination. As a result, the annual sales grew from zero to approximately USD 300,000 by 2024, with more than 75% of the revenue returning to the community. Beyond tourism, the homestay programme inspired a local primary school initiative, encouraging pupils to explore their community and value the Satoyama heritage they will inherit. The major impact has been a renewed appreciation among residents for the value of their own culture and way of life. What was once considered ordinary is now recongnised as something worth sharing with visitors and preserving for future generations. This shift in mindset continues to inspire new tourism products, community initiatives, international partnerships.
Residents regularly approach the DMO with ideas for new tourism products, local challenges, and opportunities for collaboration, reflecting a stronger sense of ownership and pride in the community.
Additionally, visitors gained access to a one-stop platform for booking accommodation, activities, and transport, significantly improving the ease and quality of the visitor experience.

Reflections: What you learned and what others can learn
One of the most important lessons from Miyama’s experience is that sustainable destination management must begin with the community itself. The establishment of the DMO was not simply an organisational reform; it was a turning point that enabled residents to take ownership of their future in the face of challenges such as population decline, an ageing society, and limited human resources.

The process taught us that building consensus takes time. Some residents initially questioned the value of the DMO and the need to invest in dedicated staff. Continuous dialogue, transparency, and the sharing of tourism data were therefore essential in building trust and securing long-term support. Looking back, we would have invested in data collection earlier to strengthen understanding and support for change.
One of the biggest surprises was discovering that Miyama's greatest tourism asset was not the Satoyama landscape itself, but the people who sustain it. Through community interviews and visitor surveys, we realised that visitors were equally interested in local stories, traditions, and the values behind landscape conservation.
Our advice to other destinations is simple: start with people, not products. Build trust before pursuing growth and recognise that a destination's greatest strength often lie in its people and everyday way of life.

The Ripple Effect: Lasting impact

The most significant change has been a shift in mindset. What was once considered ordinary such as the Satoyama traditions, is now recognised as something worth sharing with visitors. This renewed appreciation has encouraged more residents to participate in tourism initiatives. Three families who first joined as homestay hosts later established their own farm inns, creating new livelihood opportunities. Through ongoing data sharing, business meetings, and collaborative product development, 174 DMO members continue to work towards a shared vision, ensuring that tourism remains a community-wide effort. This network has transformed ordinary activities into unique experiences that allow visitors to participate in community activities, such as harvesting materials used to maintain thatched-roof houses. These experiences have also attracted younger generations interested in community revitalisation. One of the DMO's staff members visited Miyama through a volunteer programme and later chose to relocate from the city, inspired by the Satoyama lifestyle and strong sense of community. The ripple effect extends beyond Miyama. As a Best Tourism Village, Miyama collaborates with fellow villages, promoting mutual learning and advancing sustainable tourism together.

Awards or Certifications

1.Excellence award at the Ecotourism Award hosted by Ministry of the Environment (2017)
2. The special award at the KANSAI Inbound business awards by METI-KANSAI (2019)
3. CNA(Chane News Asia), Why are tourists flocking to this remote Japanese village? (2021)
4. Best Tourism Villages by UN Tourism (2021)
5. BBC Travel, The masters of a 5,000-year-old craft (18 May 2023), BBC Travel Article.
6. Sustainable Tourism Awards (UNWTO) at the 7th Japan Tourism Awards (2023)
7.Booking.com Award in the Reginal Stay Plan Competition (2024)
8. SCOTO (Scottish Community Tourism) in Learning Across Borders, (2026)
9. Best Practice Case, Monitoring Report of the Best Tourism Villages by UN Tourism, UN Tourism (2026)

Web Articles

1. https://www.env.go.jp/nature/ecotourism/try-ecotourism/pamphlet/pdf/13award.pdf
2. https://www.kansai.meti.go.jp/3-1toukou/toukou_award_outline.html
3. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L42TMX8-rds
4. https://tourism-villages.unwto.org/en/villages/miyama/
5. https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20230518-the-masters-of-a-5000-year-old-craft
6. https://www.t-expo.jp/_shared/pdf/tej2023_the-japan-tourism-awards-2023-winners.pdf
7. https://prtimes.jp/main/html/rd/p/000001418.000031978.html
8. https://www.scoto.co.uk/blog/learning-across-borders/
9. https://www.e-unwto.org/doi/epdf/10.18111/9789284427475

Other Relevant Links

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yeEOIciVj8s

Quotes or Testimonials

One international visitor who experienced our half-day home visit programme noted:
"Compared with crowded Kyoto, Miyama offered a striking contrast. The beautiful thatched-roof village was impressive, but the opportunity to spend time with local residents and hear their stories was the most memorable part of the experience."
Several participants of the tour noted in the questionnaire:“The guides' enthusiastic explanations greatly enhanced the experience.”

Resident feedback who read DMO’s mid-term tourism strategy 2026-2030.
“I appreciate the commitment to community development grounded in an understanding of our local history and realities. As a resident, I am committed to playing my part in supporting the community.”

UN Tourism Secretary General left a comment on her visit in May 2026. ”Thank you for giving me such a beautiful flavour of your authentic village.”