The spirit of Mountain Faith Endures with the Cedar Path: The trajectory of a mountain-faith community in northeastern Japan toward making its living heritage sustainable

Toge, Japan
Toge Community Neighborhood Association
Local Destinations (including villages, cities, municipalities, islands)
Culture & Heritage

Summary of Good Practice Story
Toge, the 1,400-year-old gateway village to Japan's sacred Dewa Sanzan mountains, faced a double crisis: cedar trees lining its iconic 2,446-step pilgrimage stairway were dying (40 identified as at risk of falling in 2019), while its shukubo pilgrim lodges had dwindled from 336 to fewer than 30 and its shrine and Buddhist temples remained divided by an 1868 law separating Shinto and Buddhism. Long-separated stakeholders — the Dewa Sanzan Shrine, temples, lodge owners, residents and city government — came together for the first time through the 2021 "Toge district Value Rediscovery Project," a 2022 local currency called "Uketamo," and university-supported research reframing lodges, cedars and mountain faith as one "living heritage." In 2025, five key organisations signed a formal management agreement, and a voluntary entry-contribution trial for cedar protection raised over ¥15 million from more than 22,000 visitors in two months, leading to a new foundation aiming for public-interest status by 2031. The community's guiding lesson: making a problem visible through data can unite stakeholders who have coexisted in parallel for over a century, but lasting change also requires reuniting people's shared emotional commitment to place, not just economic logic.

Setting the Scene: Destination & context
Toge district, located in Yamagata Prefecture, has been the gateway to the three Dewa Sanzan Mountains comprising Mount Haguro, Mount Gassan, and Mount Yudono, a mountain faith site continuing for 1,400 years.

Today, Toge is home to only about 1,100 residents. Among them are roughly 100 Shugendo practitioners called yamabushi. Here, faith is not a special occasion. It is simply daily life. Families have run shukubo for hundreds of years, offering pilgrims a place to rest and prepare before their ascent, where they sleep, eat simple vegetarian cuisine, and pray.

The stone stairway to Mount Haguro stretches 1.7 kilometers, climbing 2,446 steps beneath more than 550 giant cedar trees that average between 300 and 600 years old.

Whatever prestige the outside world may offer, the yamabushi have continued to meet everything they encounter on the mountain with a single word: "Uketamo." I accept.

The Turning Point: Why change was needed
Toge has confronted two quiet but visibly appearing emergencies at once: the loss of the cedar tree along with the path, and the fading of Toge as the community itself.

The On-site investigation for cedar trees in 2019 diagnosed that 40 cedar trees were in danger of falling down. This investigation was planned after the particular case occurred in 2017, when a falling cedar tree half-destroyed a small branch shrine on Mount Haguro. Since one of the important cultural resources of this site was damaged, we recognized the urgency of our cedar trees' situation.

In addition, Toge, as our community, has been in danger of endless shrinkage and the loss of our traditions. As one of the most recognizable numbers, the Shukubo lodges, once counted as 336 in 200 years ago, had dropped to fewer than 30. Visitors keep coming to Dewa Sanzan, but do not stop at Toge. We can hear that some of us frequently lament the lack of economic resources for cultural preservation and tourism investment, as “People come, but nothing remains.”

Furthermore, Toge has been facing a history of separation for more than 150 years. A national law split Shinto and Buddhism apart in 1868. While Shinto and Buddhism were altogether under the practice of Shugendo, the shrine and the temples were separated. Until now, they kept their faith side by side, without being united together as our ancestors had implemented.

The Vision: What you set out to do
To change the future and make the community itself sustainable, we set one simple goal: the culture and nature of Toge should be decided, protected, and passed on by the people of Toge, not by outsiders.

In order to achieve this goal, stakeholders who had long stayed in their own corners in the community agreed to sit at one table for the first time to discuss how to protect their tradition. Those stakeholders were the Dewa Sanzan Shrine (the Central Shrine of the mountain site), the Buddhism temples, the lodge owners, the residents, the city government, and visiting scholars.

Also, we decided to treat faith and daily life as two wheels of the cart called Toge. Under this concept, all stakeholders shared the same perception that we cannot protect one of them without saving the other. Moreover, they defined the role of visitors in this site under the spirit of Uketamo. On this site, tourists are not just customers buying a view, resources, and labor. Rather, they are individuals who could share the faith and help carry on the tradition. The primary actors for those visions are the neighborhood association, the lodge owners, and a local company, together with the university.

The Journey: How change happened
As the first action, each path of Shinto and Buddhism, which had been separated but protected below the surface in our community, appeared to stand side by side in 2017. Even though the Dewa Sanzan turned into the “mountain of Shintoism” in 1868, people in Toge have quietly kept the Buddhism-driven cultural resources safe, with surviving temples in this site. Their cooperation came to light in public by gathering in the hall Senbutsudo of Dewa Sanzan shrine (our central shrine), and dedicating a rite uniting Shinto and Buddhist forms, the Haguro Hōraku.

Next action was launched on the table. The community established in 2021 the “Toge district Value Rediscovery Project”, which aims to seize the value of our site by residents and to bring various stakeholders to this site together. From this opportunity, we expected to raise attention among residents toward the sustainability of the site itself. In order to sustain economic circulation within the site, not only merely from tourist expenditure but also from residents’ in-area consumption, this town also introduced the local currency called “Uketamo” in 2022 with collaborating 17 shops in this site. Along with the emergence of locally launched transformational self-development program “Yamabushido” that welcomes visitors from all parts of the globe, Toge has gradually built up its momentum for their own place brand identity establishment.

Then, the second action emerged from the base of a cedar tree, where our core philosophy came from. Based on the cedar tree diagnosis in 2019, the consecutive investigation in 2022 revealed that the grove had slowly shrunk from 585 in 1955 to 558 by 2022. Along with the forest inventory, residents answered surveys about which cultural resources they value, to

recognize what to preserve for residents themselves. Scholars from Hokkaido University assisted the site itself to describe its lodges, cedars, and mountain faith as one “living heritage”. From this action, the right to define Toge’s value slowly began to move from outside back to inside.

As extensions of such an initiative to “rediscover” what to sustain for the future, we have tried until now to keep the momentum of sustainability with holding three days' GSTC seminar in 2023 and 2024. During the fieldwork of the seminar in 2024, both the priests of Buddhist temple and shinto shrine participated along with the context of sustainability, beyond the over-century-long separation.

The momentum within the site encourages several key players to have further initiatives for the protection of place identity. In July 2025, five key players (Tsuruoka city government, Toge town development company, Haguro tourism association, pilgrimage lodge association, and the Toge neighborhood association) signed an agreement for the inclusive management of this site, focusing on the sustainability of place identity and local life. Furthermore, for the cedar-tree protection, the community tested a voluntary “entry contribution” experiment on Mount Haguro between September 18 and November 23 of 2025, asking visitors to give what they could.

Since when tourism enterprises and scholars acknowledged the rarity of Toge from the aspect of anthropological studies and tourism resources, it has always been the external stakeholders that determine the value and slogan of this site. However, finally, various initiatives have been taken by the people who live there, in order to inherit their place identity, before the collapse as the result of extreme commodification.

The Breakthrough: What you achieved

Those long-running initiatives also slowly took shape for Toge’s cultural identity. Ultimately, during the fieldwork of the 2024 GSTC seminar, everyone at the lecture came to witness a small but revolutionary moment that no one expected. The deputy head priest of the town's temple, Shozenin, spontaneously suggested and truly participated in a Shinto-oriented prayer. As the majority of participants acknowledged the history of decoupling between Buddhism and Shintoism on this site, every participant put into words afterwards, “Toge has truly changed”.

As participants of the workshop felt how drastic our change was, Toge now came to possess way more attention than we could ever imagine. The voluntary entry contribution was astonishing for everyone, with the tangible amount of collection with more than 22,000 visitors giving over ¥15 million (about €81,000) for about two months. Despite the increase of financial burden, around nine in ten said they supported the idea, mentioning as "A contribution system like this should have come much sooner." With this proof, the community created the “Uketamo Haguro Foundation” in 2026 to care for the cedars, aiming to become a recognised public-

interest foundation by 2031. From the circumstance that conservation once depended on year-by-year subsidies, the community now has a stable fund of its own.

Not only the entry contribution, but various financial expenditures also began to stay in the community. As of 2025, foreign visitors on the Yamabushido programme alone brought in about ¥23 million (around €125,000), with 34 non-Japanese tourists (about ¥676,000 per participant).

With all those achievements, Inside the community, pride returned.

Reflections: What you learned and what others can learn

Based on our journey to revitalize our sense of ownership with philosophy, we would like to leave the following reflections.

First of all, it is the starting point of every behavior to make the problem visible. By visualizing the issue with clear numbers, various stakeholders determined to sit in the same table beyond more than a century of parallel history. As represented by the collaboration between the Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines, only emotion makes the issue permanently parallel. Coexistence of fact and emotion leads us to unexpected achievements.

On the other hand, while the evidence allows us to achieve great results, it is also essential to fix hearts and self-esteem before managing with logic in order to protect the culture in a true sense. If we concentrate solely on the numeric factors and economic impacts to make Toge sustainable, we could not achieve such an inclusive trajectory of the brand management process. Regardless of where individuals are from and the purpose of visiting the same place, culture is one whole, including humans, not a list of parts. Saving the cedars without the people who pray beneath them, or the lodges that keep the faith alive, would mean nothing. The spirit of Uketamo made the whole stakeholder one united team, and gave us the same vision of the future to move forward.

The Ripple Effect: Lasting impact

As a new member of the pilgrimage community that Toge enjoyed welcoming for centuries, people from far away, even from other countries, now contribute to carrying our culture. Though this is a quiet way, without any astonishing sensation, this is a return to what Toge was. As has been done here for centuries, we welcome many pilgrims and expand the community even beyond the border. For us, tourists are not temporary visitors anymore; they are members of our community who pass our culture and traditions, along with the philosophy of Uketamo.

Awards or Certifications

- Shōrei Festival (Sacred Fire Ritual of Mount Haguro): Designated as a National Intangible Folk Cultural Property of Japan (2014) https://japan-heritage.bunka.go.jp/ja/culturalproperties/result/1550/
- Japan Heritage: "Dewa Sanzan - A Journey of Spiritual Rebirth" (2016) https://nihonisan-dewasanzan.jp/

- Michelin Green Guide Japan 2019: 3-stars at Mt. Haguro Cedar Trees: https://www.tohokukanko.jp/en/features/detail_8.html
- Sumai no Machinami (Scenic Townscape) Award, supported by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (2022) https://www.machinami.or.jp/pages/contest_result17.shtml
- Priority Area designation under the Tsuruoka City Historical Landscape Preservation and Improvement Plan, Phase II (2023–2032) https://www.city.tsuruoka.lg.jp/seibi/rekishitekifuti/rekisikeikakunintei.files/rekimatikeikaku2ki.pdf
- Five-Party Agreement on Sustainable Historical and Tourism Town-Building (2025) https://www.city.tsuruoka.lg.jp/shisei/shiyakusyo/infomation/haguro/joho/hmiryokukouennkai.html
- Fodor's Travel (USA): Nominated as one of 10 destinations begging for more visitors (as a part of Tsuruoka City): https://www.fodors.com/news/photos/10-destinations-begging-for-more-visitors

Web Articles

- Yamabushido programme: https://www.yamabushido.jp/
- Japan Tourism Agency: (2025): Sustainable destination development centered on the yamabushi community's singular, undesignated cultural resources. Model Project for Sustainable Tourism Promotion, Fiscal Year 2024: Construction of Exemplary Practices in the Advancement of Sustainable Tourism. https://www.mlit.go.jp/kankocho/content/001880138.pdf
- Yamagata Shimbun, "Mt. Haguro 'entry-contribution system' starts: community-led funding to protect culture" (17 May 2026)
- Toge Community Neighborhood Association (2020). "Togebito" (People in Toge: town paper of our community) https://tougebito.net/

Other Relevant Links

Quotes or Testimonials

Through daily life and faith, the existence of the cedar tree path is dwelled in the depth of the human heart, beyond the logic itself. I believe that the value of this cedar tree path lies precisely in the existence of people like us in Toge. Paradoxically speaking, the true value of the cedar tree path in Mount Haguro consists in the people who genuinely cherish these trees and have steadfastly continued to protect them (town paper Togebito (people in Toge): Published on May 31st, 2024).

"It is inevitable to face the decline of the number of Shukubo Pilgrim lodge. However, we must never let them die out. In order to protect our culture, tradition, and history, and to pass Toge as a sacred place for generations from now, we have to not just attract more tourists, but to grow

the scale of visitors who touch the true essence of pilgrimage.” (Kazuhiro Hayasaka, Daisinbō pilgrim lodge)