A Study on the Actual Developing State and Future Development Possibilities of Green Tourism in Okinawa

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Abstract

Tourism is one of Okinawa's leading industries, and in recent years green tourism has been developing for the purpose of improving tourism quality with increasing attention from levels such as administration, practitioners, tourists and local residents. Taking the on-site experience and exchange activities between cities and farming, forestry and fishing villages in Okinawa as research examples, the authors examine green tourism development trends from the perspective of prefectural administration, city, town and village administration levels as well as those of practitioners; and examine the present state of green tourism development by taking Higashi Village as a case study; pointing out areas in need of improvement. The research shows the following results. Firstly, because the rapid increase in practitioner numbers correlates with growing green tourism needs, administrative guidance and facility improvement is slow. Secondly, from the case study of Higashi Village, it is found that in carrying out green tourism activities, mainly agricultural experience and farm village home-stays, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry plays a key role, and green tourism development aims are consciously considered. Moreover, appropriate green tourism exchange facility maintenance, deregulation of the Hotel Business Law and Fire Regulations are also necessary.

Keywords: tourism; green tourism; green tourism practitioner; Chamber of Commerce and Industry; Higashi Village; Okinawa

1. Preface

1.1 Research Background and Purpose

Efforts have been made to develop tourism in Okinawa prefecture, with the Okinawa Promotion Plan and Japanese Resort Law as their basis. Tourism is one of Okinawa's leading industries; however, tourism quality is a well known issue. There has been an excessive increase in environmental problems as side effects of large scale development in various industries. Tourist needs and recreational preferences have changed as well, shifting from those of conventional mass tourism to focus on activities related to relaxation and stress relief, on-site experience, and cultural exchange.

Thus, increasing attention has been paid to Green Tourism (henceforth GT) recently. The goals of GT development are to successfully integrate and balance the key components of GT, which are the use and preservation of regional natural resources, local ecosystems, and impacts on these from tourists and local people; to maintain the original natural characters and local cultures of farming, forestry, and fishing villages; to effectively abide by local and national land use plans and regulations; and to achieve excellent communication among people. Moreover, it is hoped that GT activities can be considered as an opportunity to develop villages, and should be based on a regional consensus of local needs and requirements.

This study, focusing on the points mentioned above, aims to clarify the GT development trends in Okinawa, the current state of GT in Okinawa according to its practitioners by taking Higashi Village as a case study which has implemented successful GT approaches, and to identify major problems, so as to understand future GT development possibilities in Okinawa. This should be based on a total understanding of the evolving trends of its administration and practitioners¹.

1.2 Previous Research

Previous studies related to GT have been carried out in the fields of sociology, urban planning and rural planning. In the urban planning field, there is GT research ² which focuses on population fluidity and maintenance in the target region, and research ³ which chooses to pinpoint the needs of city resident's leisure activities and demand for GT. In the rural planning field, recently there has been research ⁴ on green tourism that includes discussions on regional network forming or landscape management systems through GT planning, which has touched upon GT experience.
contents or activity management. However, research on the actual state of GT activity development, and specifically on GT administration and practitioner practice, including examination of problems among them is rare; also Okinawa has never been taken as a research subject.

1.3 Research Methods

This research began with a summarization of GT concepts gathered from previous studies and documentaries and then took the on-site GT experience and exchange activities between cities and farming, forestry and fishing villages as research subjects. Through documentary study and interviews with administrations, the GT development trends in Okinawa are organized on three levels. Lastly Higashi Village's GT development is set as the research area, data are collected from on-site discussion forums, and activity "Agri. Network Arime" is examined. Finally, through all the studies the actual state of GT development and its problems in Okinawa are described and defined.

2. Definition of Green Tourism and Research Object

2.1 Definition of Green Tourism

The definition of GT in Japan is as defined publicly by The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries. Moreover, in Okinawa there is also a definition: "GT is the on-site experience taken in farming, forestry and fishing villages (henceforth FFFV). Accommodation is usually in local houses of the FFFV. Also, in a wider sense, Blue Tourism and Forest Tourism are included in GT".

2.2 Research Object

According to the definition of GT, (as mentioned above), this study takes the on-site experience and exchange activities between cities and FFFV regions as its research object. In Fig.1., the horizontal axis represents natural and cultural aspects of GT, and the vertical axis represents different durations for experiences, while the broken line represents activity items related to GT. Detailed activity items are shown within range A in the GT concept chart (Fig.1.).

3. Present GT Development Trends in Okinawa

3.1 GT Development Trends at the Prefectural Administration Level and Areas Desiring Improvement

GT development trends at the prefectural administration level, which can be seen from Table 1., take the establishment of the GT Research Committee (henceforth GTRC) in 1996 as its beginning, and up until the creation of "The 2nd Exchange and Promotion Plan between Cities and Villages" in 2005, it had 11 projects in progress focusing on three themes - GT development organization building, staff training and facility maintenance. These themes include activity leader's training through training courses, support for the establishment of various local GT development committees, and GT activity facility maintenance.

According to the data gathered from discussion forums with the administrations, the suggested possible research subjects and desired improvements in Okinawa are:

- The setting up of professional staff
- Guidance and assistance to villages in progressing with GT development
- Coordination with tourism policy and regional promotion policy
- Establishment of regional information networks and public space creation for information exchange
- Regional promotion

Meanwhile, seen from GT development procedures in Okinawa, residents (practitioner) leadership is very strong. So it is necessary that requests from practitioners should be well grasped and relevant measures be taken accordingly.

3.2 GT Development Trends at City, Town and Village Administration Level and Areas Desiring Improvement

Table 2. summarizes the GT development approaches carried out autonomously, such as Higashi Village, Ie Village and Motobu Town. Higashi Village is the earliest to adopt GT approaches in Okinawa, having a GTRC centered within the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, (henceforth CCI) and various research topics have been carried out actively and positively. For this reason it is to be the survey ground for clarification of GT approaches and future development subjects in Okinawa.
While in Ie Village, because acknowledgement towards this village has risen rapidly, and also because it has abundant natural resources and is well equipped for standard tourism, GT development in this region can be highly anticipated.

Motobu Town is famous for mandarin orange cultivation, and it has been moving full scale with the promotion of general information facilities to improve local tourism. Also, due to the nearby large-scale sightseeing facilities like the Ocean Expo Aquarium, methods to attract more tourists to both of these facilities should be considered.

3.3 GT Practitioners’ Movement in Okinawa
As for GT practitioners in Okinawa, practitioner numbers and practices differ by location. Though GT practitioners are distributed in various places over a wide area, which is shown in Fig. 2., GT is carried out by emphasizing activities with on-site agricultural experience as their focus. See from Fig. 2., Higashi Village has the most practitioners - 36 persons.

4. Actual State of GT in Higashi Village
Higashi Village has the only GTRC in Okinawa, and positive approaches have been made with the cooperation of the administration, CCI and research group members.

4.1 Development of GT Approaches in Higashi Village
As shown in Table 3., in Higashi Village, on-site agricultural activities have been carried out even

| Village name | Activity organizer | Approaches | Points for Improvement |
|-------------|--------------------|------------|-----------------------|
| Higashi Village | CCI, Tourism Planning Division | • Centered with CCI, Higashi Village GTRC, carried out agricultural experience activities and farm village home-stays for students on school excursions and became the model for other regions. | • High expectations for Higashi Village to develop into an exchange-type farm village. |
| Ie Village | Tourism Commerce and Industry Division, Tourism Association | • Began conducting farm-stay projects in 2003 • 1,600 tourists in 2004, 4,100 in 2005 • Requested assistance from prefecture for facility maintenance, and has a special zone setting. | • Staff training for farmers due to different activity contents. • Strengthen cooperation with other fields. |
| Motobu Town | Motobu Industry Promotion Division | • In 2000, set up Exchange and Promotion Association between City and Village Areas–began management measurements by introducing the city and village exchange project. • Introduction of regional cooperation system at the prefectural level and initiation of workshops. | • Create leisure space • Improve the current system for attracting tourists with better facility maintenance, encourage cooperation among each village and among local residents. |
earlier than those done at the prefectural level, which started in 1990. In 1996 Higashi Village's GT practices began, and in the same year the Okinawa GTRC was founded. In 2004, the Okinawa GTRC changed into the Higashi Village GTRC, belonging to CCI. The CCI, working as the main office of the Higashi Village GTRC, maintains close cooperation with the committee members. It has carried out a series of on-site agricultural activities and farm village home-stays mainly for students on school excursions. CCI also holds exchange-oriented meetings with le Village and holds opinion exchange meetings and tourism forums mainly for persons related to GT practice in Okinawa. CCI coordinates participant numbers and schedule and works on the organization of workshops and tourism forums for staff training.

4.2 On-Site Discussion Forums on Higashi Village and Present GT Practices

To clarify GT practice conditions after gathering data on Higashi Village’s GT approach, on-site discussion forums have been conducted on 10 GTRC member farms, with the actual farmers as subjects. The contents have been illustrated in Table 4.

Here are the most prominent findings from the farmers:
- There are committee members who are carrying out GT exchange activities also through their individual farms.
- There are committee members whose aims are to form an exchange-type farm village.
- Activities for beautifying the village are initiated with the attention and interests of tourists and local residents in mind.
- It is widely acknowledged that village promotion, landscape and environmental protection are important.

Existing problems and subjects needing improvement:
1. It is important and necessary that young people take part in the GTRC.
2. Endeavors to attract new tourists are desired.
(3) Deregulation of the Hotel Business Law with a review of Building Standards and Fire Regulation should be considered according to the growth of GT activities. Deregulation of the Hotel Business Law concerning GT activities mainly focuses on the standards of sanitation. With the development of modern society, the standards of modern hotels, especially concerning kitchen and toilet facilities, are of a very high standard, which the normal country farmhouse can not meet, and it is easy to cause sanitation problems. As to Fire Regulation, old farmhouses are usually made of wood, which more easily catches fire, compared to modern hotel building materials. But to hold GT activity the country-like environment is very necessary, therefore deregulation of the Hotel Business Law is required by practitioners.

(4) Current facilities for exchange-type activities could be improved. GT activities are mainly related to nature and are old fashioned, so the exchange facilities for GT activities are usually rather primitive, referring to farmhouses or farm gardens for people to experience agricultural life etc. The current exchange facilities are mainly private farmhouses which cannot meet the increasing needs for GT activity. So what we mean by improvement and maintenance of exchange facilities is that certain public places should be supplied where participants can experience agricultural life together, such as making dishes and food or tourist souvenirs out of the plants they plant by themselves. But this kind of public space should still maintain the style as farmhouse, which is essential to GT.

(5) Efforts solely operating on the local level are insufficient; a coordinated effort on the prefectural level with administration backing is essential for success.

### 4.3 Activity "Agri. Network Arime"

Through on-site discussion forums and interviews, GT activity in Higashi Village – activity of the professional farmhouse group "Agri. Network Arime" is examined.

(1) Activity Situations

| Start | Year 1996 |
| --- | --- |
| Place | Un-used farmland inside "land improving district" of Higashi Village |
| Purposes | • Enjoy the pleasure of growing crops. |
| | • Activate the exchange activity between city consumers and farmers in order to develop agriculture. |
| | • Form an information exchange network. |
| | • Resolve the problem of depopulation. |
| Contents | • Organize participants to plant crops. |
| | • Enroll Research Committee members. |
| | • Set up of individual citizen farm (free offer), carrying out exchange activity among citizens – in 2004, 40 groups of citizen farms were formed. |
| Others | • In 2004, were recognized of "Hometown best 100 recognition business" of the Prefecture by Exchange Division. |
| Feedbacks | • Feelings have been challenged by such activities. |
| | • Stress reduction is a side-benefit. |
| | • Through information exchange, networking among participants has been strengthened. |
| | • Participants really enjoy themselves. |
| | • Some participants even choose to relocate to place where they participated in GT activities as visitors. |
| | • Practitioners must bear certain economic burdens to attract tourists. |

### Table 5. "Agri. Network Arime" Activity

| Start | Year 1996 |
| --- | --- |
| Place | Un-used farmland inside "land improving district" of Higashi Village |
| Purposes | • Enjoy the pleasure of growing crops. |
| | • Activate the exchange activity between city consumers and farmers in order to develop agriculture. |
| | • Form an information exchange network. |
| | • Resolve the problem of depopulation. |
| Contents | • Organize participants to plant crops. |
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| | • Participants really enjoy themselves. |
| | • Some participants even choose to relocate to place where they participated in GT activities as visitors. |
| | • Practitioners must bear certain economic burdens to attract tourists. |

### Table 4. Present Conditions of GT Practice in Higashi Village and Possible Improvements

| Research item | Actual conditions | Problems |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Constitution of GTRC | • Thirty five farm families who were born in Higashi village are members. | • The aging character of the members calls for the acquisition of some new, youthful staff. |
| | • Most of the members are over 50. | |
| GTRC Activities | GT experience research program: half-day course, one-day course | • Better approaches are expected, e.g., free offers and the support of exchange activities. |
| | • Persons who attend the activity are mainly students on school excursions. | |
| | • Activity contents are mainly harvesting, fertilizing and planting of pineapples and oranges. | |
| | • There are members who are actively carrying out all kinds of exchange activities through their individual farms. | |
| Purpose of GT Practice | • Large income expectations. | • Set clear aim for GTRC. |
| | • There are members whose main purpose is to form exchange-type farm villages through use of regional resources. | • Improve the over-all practicing level of members. |
| Cooperation Between CCI and the Administration | • CCI coordinates the participant numbers and schedule and also works on the organization of workshops and tourism forums for staff training. | • To attract tourists, deregulation of the Hotel Business Law could be realized through cooperation among GTRC members, the CCI and administration. |
| | • Administration coordinates deregulation of the Hotel Business Law and insurance requirements. | |
| Real-Life Influence of GT Practice | • Monthly income rises by approximately 100,000 Yen. | • Set financial support system for house redecoration and repair for village home-stay activity hosts. |
| | • Attention is given to local villages and exchanges with local residents are more active. | • Improve direct support system to practitioners. |
| | • Activities for beautifying the village are initiated with the attention and interests of local residents and tourists in mind. | |
| | • Increased opportunities for outsiders to discover the charm and character of local villages. | |
| Influence from Higashi Village Through GT Practice | • Tourist numbers increase with the recognition of Higashi Village. | • Due to increasing GT practice needs, facility maintenance and improvement should be given special attention. |
| | • Farm villages receive more chances to develop, which helps with their promotion. | |
| | • Compared to resort-type sightseeing developments, which drastically alter natural environments, GT practice helps with landscape and environmental protection. | |
In recent years, due to the growing boom in family vegetable gardens, tourists and local citizen's needs for on-site agricultural experience have been increasing. Various people such as salaried workers, housewives, students on school excursions, and retirees participate in activities. We have outlined the detailed activity situation in Table 5.

(2) Existing Problems
Through examination, we found that to attract more tourists, the practitioners must bear certain economic burdens, while the establishment of a GT development system and methods to directly support practitioners is necessary.

5. Conclusion
Through this research, we have clarified the following points:

1) GT development trends in Okinawa started with the establishment of GTRC in 1996, which held regular activities for staff training and facilities improvement. The GT developed more actively through various approaches such as local resource exploration at the city, town, and village levels and improvements of the overall GT support system.

2) GT practitioners have various GT approaches in the northern regions and isolated islands of Okinawa. Meanwhile, the number of practitioners is increasing. It is fully appreciated that the understanding of actual GT development conditions and existing problems is of great importance.

3) However, because the rapid increase in practitioner numbers directly correlates to growing GT needs, administrative guidance and facility improvements are sluggish and inefficient when it comes to dealing with regional GT practice problems. Also GT approaches, contents, and cooperation with the administration differ greatly in each respective region. So it is necessary to create opportunities for information exchange or improvement workshops for advanced regions and the less developed regions alike, in order to raise the overall quality of the GT practice.

4) From the case study of Higashi Village, we found that CCI plays a key role in carrying out GT activities, and functions as the bridge between administration and practitioners; through citizens' agricultural experiences and farm village home-stays, exchange is well facilitated between local farmers and visitors; regional resource application, environmental protection, agricultural promotion, and preventing depopulation of rural areas are consciously and openly accepted as the main aims of GT development.

5) Therefore there are problems in need of solutions. The improvement and maintenance of exchange facilities is very important. To attract more tourists, deregulation of the Hotel Business Law is necessary, while a review of Building Standards and Fire Regulations, and special example zones should be set up. To realize all of these aims, cooperation between administration and practitioners should be strengthened.

6) Finally, we suggest that the following subjects are important for future research. Exchange between urban areas and farming, forestry, and fishing villages are expected to advance further while considering the above-mentioned conditions. Although the GT approaches in Higashi Village have been explored here, investigation in other practice regions both in and outside of Okinawa, and comparative research regarding participant aims and evaluations should not be overlooked.

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Endnotes
1. The “practitioner” here refers to those who actively practice green tourism, and are taken as the research objective as written in 2.2.
2. According to the report (1992) of the GT Research Committee of The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, “GT is a leisure activity that involves staying on-site in natural environments such as farming, mountainous, and fishing villages and enjoying on-site experience, cultural exchange and communication with people.”
3. Autonomously refers to the city, town and village level which carries out GT activities in the local region while cooperating with individual practitioners, such as working out GT development policies, enforcing support measures and establishing research committees, etc.
4. “GT practitioner in Okinawa” here refers to persons who have completed the GT training course held by Okinawa prefecture; persons who are taking the training course held by village activation associations and working on agricultural improvement at present; persons who are working in GT related fields in which the activities have been acknowledged by the prefecture; and persons who are carrying out the research object activities prescribed in 2.2. (Moreover, the region that became Nanjo City (Sashiki-cho, Chinen-son, Tamagusuku-son, and Ozato-son) and Yae Town (Kochinda-cho and Gushikami-son) by the consolidation of municipalities on January 1, 2006 is shown in the figure using the original district name at the investigation stage. In addition, the practitioner's movement illustration charts of each isolated island are omitted here.)
5. The Hotel Business Law is the law to attempt to appropriate the management of hotel business, inn business, and lodging house business, etc. It causes practice restriction problems when farm village-stay and farmhouse home-stay is carried out using the GT approach. (In Japan, advanced examples can be seen in Ansinin Town of Oita Prefecture: Deregulation of the Hotel Business Law has been achieved by an original method “Membership Farm Village-Stay” through the practitioners' requests to the administration.)
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