

Monitoring attitudes to nature-based tourism: a case study of Japan's national parks

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Introduction

Japan's original National Parks Act (1931) was expanded in 1957 to the Nature Parks Law, with jurisdiction over national, quasi-national and prefectural nature parks. This hierarchical three-tiered system has survived subsequent amendments, and national parks still represent the strictest level of conservation while functioning as a platform for tourism and regional development. The number of annual visits to them rose rapidly in the 1950s and 60s when rapid economic growth and urbanization brought construction of new bullet-trains, highways and other access infrastructure along with widespread car ownership. Although numbers stagnated in the 1970s, the 80s saw further growth. Visitation peaked at 415 million in 1991, before declining to 309 million in 2011.

Research design

Research objective and key terms

The recent decline in visitation has direct implications for national park management and reflects indirectly on society's changing relationship with nature. Yet academic research remains focused on congestion at certain honeypots without addressing the downturn. This study aims to explore broader attitudes to nature-based tourism, characterized by its location in natural destinations, in order to unpack the downturn in visitation to Japan's national parks. Empirical evidence is used to identify potential cause factors for the decline in visitation via a two-pronged approach consisting of i) overall affinity for nature and awareness of national parks; and ii) willingness to visit parks.

Selection of data

The data set in Fig.1 consists of Ministry of Environment (MOE-J) records of national park visit numbers from 1950-2011. Although this data relies on an eclectic mix based on accommodation and visitor centre indicators, the estimate still provides a benchmark of macro trends. Furthermore, these findings can be supplemented with evidence from opinion polls that monitor attitudes to national parks and nature-based tourism. The second data set thus draws upon the results of one such survey that was conducted at national level by the Cabinet Office in August 2013 (COGOJ, 2013). A total of 3000 survey packs were distributed and 1,842 questionnaires were returned, a rate of 61% , which easily exceeded the minimum requirement of 350 forms needed at error of $\pm 5\%$.

Findings

Affinity for nature and awareness of national parks

83% of all respondents claimed to feel interested in nature, including 40% who were “interested” and 44% “somewhat interested.” Less than 5% were “disinterested” in nature, although this proportion with age up to a maximum 7% among respondents aged 70 and over. Among the youngest group aged below 30, only 24% were sure about their interest in nature, whereas a combined 19% were “somewhat disinterested” or “disinterested” in it. Among different models of protected areas, respondents’ level of awareness of national parks (90%) outranked others such as UNESCO world heritage sites (85%), quasi-national (64%) and prefectural nature parks (48%).

Willingness to visit national parks

Despite high levels of awareness and stated affinity for nature, only 47% of respondents chose to visit a national park among other protected areas, compared to 70% who wanted to visit a world heritage site (multiple answers were allowed). When asked directly, a combined 85% did want to visit a national park, but in younger age groups, the reported “disinterest” in nature translated into less willingness to visit national parks, with fewer than half (47%) eager to visit compared to a median of 62%. The youngsters’ lack of desire to visit national parks was even lower than the 70+ group (56%) at the other end of the age scale, where physical barriers are a significant impediment.

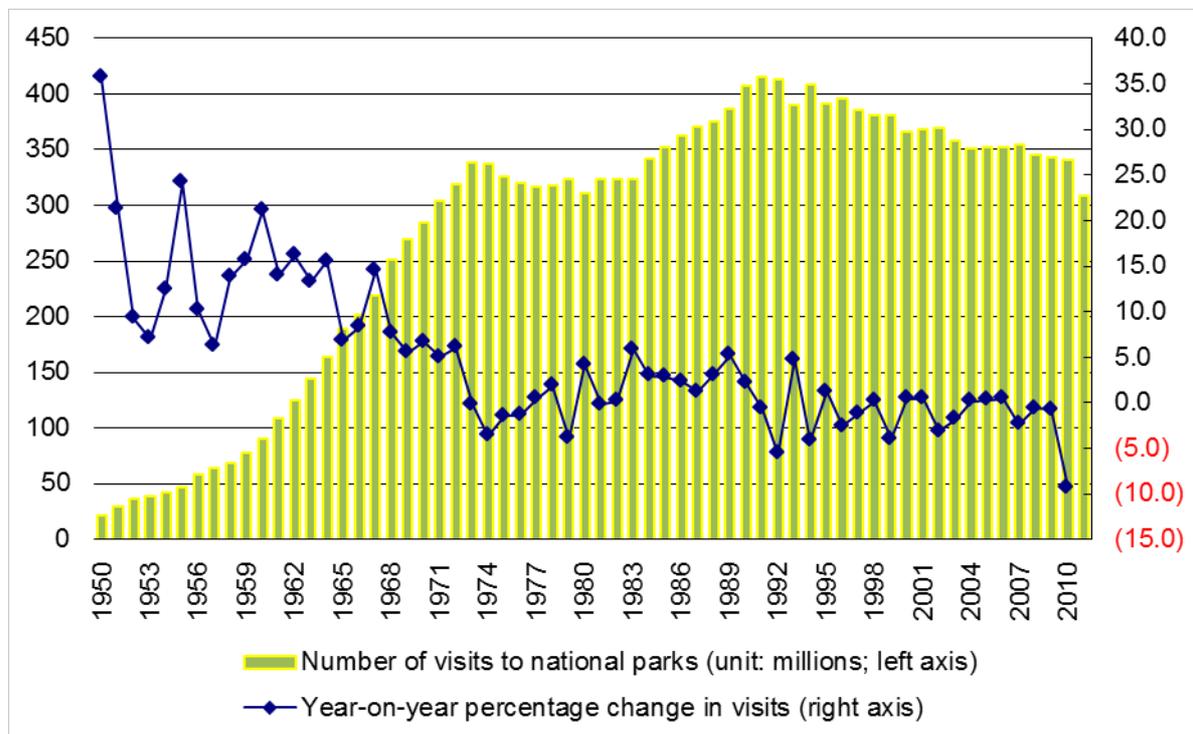


Figure 1. Annual visits to Japan’s nature parks 1950-2011 (Source: MOE-J, 2013)

Discussion

This research combines MOE-J national park visit data from 1950-2011 with a COGOJ opinion poll monitoring attitudes to national parks and nature-based tourism. Results show the number of annual visits had declined by over 25% in 2011 compared to the peak in 1991. Thus demand for nature-based tourism seems to be shrinking, and despite high levels of awareness and stated affinity for nature, visiting national parks is a less popular choice than other protected areas such as world heritage sites. The desire to visit national parks was especially low among younger age groups, with

fewer in this demographic interested in nature. More research is needed to contextualize this finding and identify potential counterstrategies to attract younger visitors. Also, other possible factors should be acknowledged including changes in the demand structure with diversification away from large-scale bus tours in favour of smaller groups or individual travel, with an increase in special interest tours (SITs), ecotourism and green (agro) tourism (Katō, 2008).

These findings should be treated with caution due to limitations in coverage, with younger people potentially underrepresented in the opinion poll – this could be rectified in future studies by offering an on-line version. Although this kind of macro study necessarily entails a degree of generalization and stated preferences can be unreliable, monitoring national trends in visitor demand and attitudes to nature-based tourism is a crucial step for park management. The case study of Japan's national parks has both practical and methodological implications for protected area planning and marketing.

References

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