

## 66 Risk communication as a measure to develop adventure tourism in Japan

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### Introduction

The global market for adventure tourism (AT) was steadily growing before the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in early 2020. The market is expected to recover most quickly in the tourism arena because AT is realized as small group tours in amidst nature. Adventure tourism was in fact introduced in Japan several years ago. This study introduces the reason that AT has not been included in commercial tourism and seeks a way to develop AT in Japan. To realize this, risk communication is examined through a case study that focuses on hiking.

Hiking is the most common AT activity worldwide. However, the number of licensed hiking exclusive tour companies in Japan is less than 15. Accordingly, while the annual number of domestic tourists is about 580 million (Japan Travel Agency 2020), the number of hikers who use tour companies are assumed to account for less than 0.1% of the total number of domestic tourists. Interestingly, the population who enjoy hiking privately numbers approximately 6.5 million (Japan Productivity Center 2017). These hikers have not been included in Japanese tourism. One of the possible reasons for this is that Japan's hiking roots lie in Shugendo, a religious belief that evolved during the 7<sup>th</sup> century as an amalgamation of animistic Shintoism and Buddhism. Commercial tourism seeks economic profits and a religion that weights spiritual values is incompatible. Another reason is that Asian tourists, including Japanese tourists, mainly focus on sightseeing, food, and bathing in hot springs. These tendencies are in contrast to those of Western tourists who prefer physical activities. Furthermore, Japanese tour companies tend to avoid AT tours that require risk control.

### Method

The Japanese government is trying to increase the number of inbound travelers and their number has steadily increased from 8.36 million in 2012 to 31.8

million in 2019 (Japan Travel Agency 2020). To further increase this number, the large AT market offers enormous potential. Following the government's policy, the Hokkaido Tourism Organization has outsourced a project to the authors to develop AT tour programs targeting Daisetsuzan National Park, the largest national park in Japan. To achieve the aim of the project, eight AT experts were invited to familiarization tours (FAM) around the Daisetsuzan National Park. To produce attractive tour programs, the invitees were requested to evaluate Daisetsuzan National Park as an AT destination. Two FAM tours were planned. FAM-1 was a relatively hard four-day trekking tour traveling the Grand Traverse Course that extends about 70 km from the northern part of the park to its southern end. FAM-2 was a day tour of medium difficulty level. Four different invitees attended each of the FAMs. The invitees included two New Zealander adventure experts, an Italian FASI instructor, an Italian media/alpinist, French and Japanese AT tour operators, and two British writers. Experiencing the FAM tours, most of them found that the volcanic topography and vastness of Daisetsuzan National Park were unique and attractive enough to attract visitors from around the world.

A questionnaire survey was conducted targeting officers of municipal and national governments, members of tourism associations/DMOs, and private companies such as accommodations, cable cars, and guides. This was because the invitees' evaluations of Daisetsuzan National Park and accompanying guides were unexpectedly high. Some of the people aware of their evaluations might have changed their thoughts that hiking should not be included in tourism because they are overall risky. The questionnaire asked, "Should hiking be included in common tourism?" In total, 29 participants answered the questionnaire.

## Results

Table 1 presents the results. Before FAM-1, the percentages of the responses that are positive to include hiking in common tourism are “Yes, when the risks are minor” 55.2% and “Definitely, yes” 13.8%. After FAM-1, these percentages changed to 69.0% and 24.1%, respectively, producing a total of 93.1%. In FAM-2, before the tour, the percentages of positive opinions were 58.6% and 31%, respectively. After FAM-2, they changed to 72.4% and 27.6%, respectively, that is a total of 100%. After both FAM-1 and FAM-2, the stakeholders’ opinions changed and they become supportive of including hiking in common tourism.

Table 1: Response to the inclusion of hiking in common tourism

FAM 1 (Trekking) N=29	Before (%)	After (%)
Should not be included	6.9	0
Undesirable	13.8	6.9
Neither	10.3	0
Yes, when the risk is minor	55.2	69
Definitely, yes	13.8	24.1

  

FAM 2 (Day hike) N=29	Before (%)	After (%)
Should not be included	3.4	0
Undesirable	3.4	0
Neither	3.4	0
Yes, when the risk is minor	58.6	72.4
Definitely, yes	31	27.6

## Discussion

The respondents’ behavioral changes identified from the questionnaire results were likely brought about by the information provided by the FAM attendees’ evaluations. This process could be regarded as risk communication in which public and private stakeholders exchange information concerning risk and risk-related factors. In this project, the FAM attendees’ feedback included risk factors, such as

hiking trail and sign deterioration, in addition to their positive evaluations. Through this information, the stakeholders were supposed to specifically know about hiking risks and provide suggestions to lower the risks. In other words, the information lowered their risk perception of hiking. The decrease in the risk perception level also coincides with the fact that the public is willing to accept “voluntary” risks roughly 1000 times greater than “involuntary” risks (Starr C. 1969). Usually the “voluntary” risk taker is the actor himself or herself, however here the stakeholders who responded to the questionnaire could also be regarded as voluntary risk takers because they might be affected adversely by hiking accidents while they could control the risks by improving trails and offering safety information. The respondents’ behavioral changes are also assumed to be affected by the FAM attendees’ high evaluations of Daisetsuzan National Park because Starr points out that social acceptance of risk is directly influenced by public awareness of the benefits of an activity. In this case, the expected benefits are those realized through AT development.

## Conclusion

Hiking has not been included in common tourism in Japan thus far, and therefore comprehensive hiking risk management has not been realized by relevant stakeholders. Even though the amount of the information that was conveyed to the stakeholders in this project was scant, the results suggested that the potential of risk communication as a measure for including hiking in common tourism in Japan.

## References

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