

# Trends and awareness of foreign visitors in national parks – a case study of national parks in Japan

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## Introduction

National parks attract many tourists to visit (Reinius & Fredman, 2007). Even for visitors coming from overseas, national parks are attractive places to visit (Weiler & Seidl, 2004). In Japan, as the number of tourists from abroad increases, the number of foreign visitors to national parks is increasing annually. The Japanese government is implementing policies aimed at improving the number of foreign tourists visiting Japan to 40 million and their consumption to 3.5 trillion Japanese yen by the Tokyo Olympics to be held in 2020. For the national parks, the goal is to increase the number of foreign users to 10 million.

The annual number of visitors to national parks in Japan is estimated to be about 350 million, of which the number of foreign visitors is approximately 5 million. It has been pointed out that a lack of publicity regarding Japanese national parks, insufficient signs, and inconvenient facilities are the reasons why the number of foreign visitors is small. Therefore, by 2020, the Japanese Ministry of the Environment intends to focus on providing information to foreigners, improving facilities, and providing various activity programs in national parks.

Location, natural resources, and recreational activities attract visitors to national parks (Neuvonen et al., 2010). What factors attract foreign visitors? Although facility improvement and diversification of services have the advantage of improving the convenience of Japanese users, there is also concern about their impact on natural resources and mismatch with the needs of foreign visitors. Thus, it is indispensable to examine the trends and needs of foreign visitors. In this study, the aim is to clarify the pattern of visits to national parks and the characteristics of foreigners visiting national parks and their needs.

## Method

Every quarter, the Japanese Tourism Agency conducts an interview survey “Consumption Trend Survey for Foreigners Visiting Japan” of foreigners leaving Japan via airports and ports. We analyzed 39,956 survey responses in 2016. Questionnaire items included individual attributes, itinerary, the purpose of the visit, expectations, satisfaction, and amount of money spent.

Besides, during the winter and summer of 2017, we asked foreign visitors in Shiretoko National Park to fill out the questionnaire. Of those foreign visitors, 389 responded on site or mailed back information regarding individual attributes, motivation, satisfaction, facility expectations, service improvement for foreigners, and demands for multilingualization.

## Results

First, we analyzed the relationship between the number of visitors and the number of foreign visitors in each national park, as released by the Ministry of the Environment. The Ministry of the Environment announces the number of visitors to national parks based on the tourist statistics of each municipality. The number of foreign visitors in each national park is estimated based on the consumption trend survey for foreigners conducted by the Japanese Tourism Agency. According to that estimation, about 6 million foreigners visit national parks annually. They are 1.7% of the total number of park visitors and 20% of the 28.69 million foreign tourists that visit Japan. Although the number of foreign visitors increases yearly, the ratio is still small. The correlation coefficient between the number of national park visitors and the number of foreign visitors is 0.92. Many foreigners visit parks that also are visited by many Japanese (Figure 1). In the national parks with famous sightseeing spots, such as hot springs, and that is close to metropolitan areas, the proportion of foreigners is relatively high. The percentage of foreigners is low in parks where access is inconvenient, such as in remote areas and on remote islands.

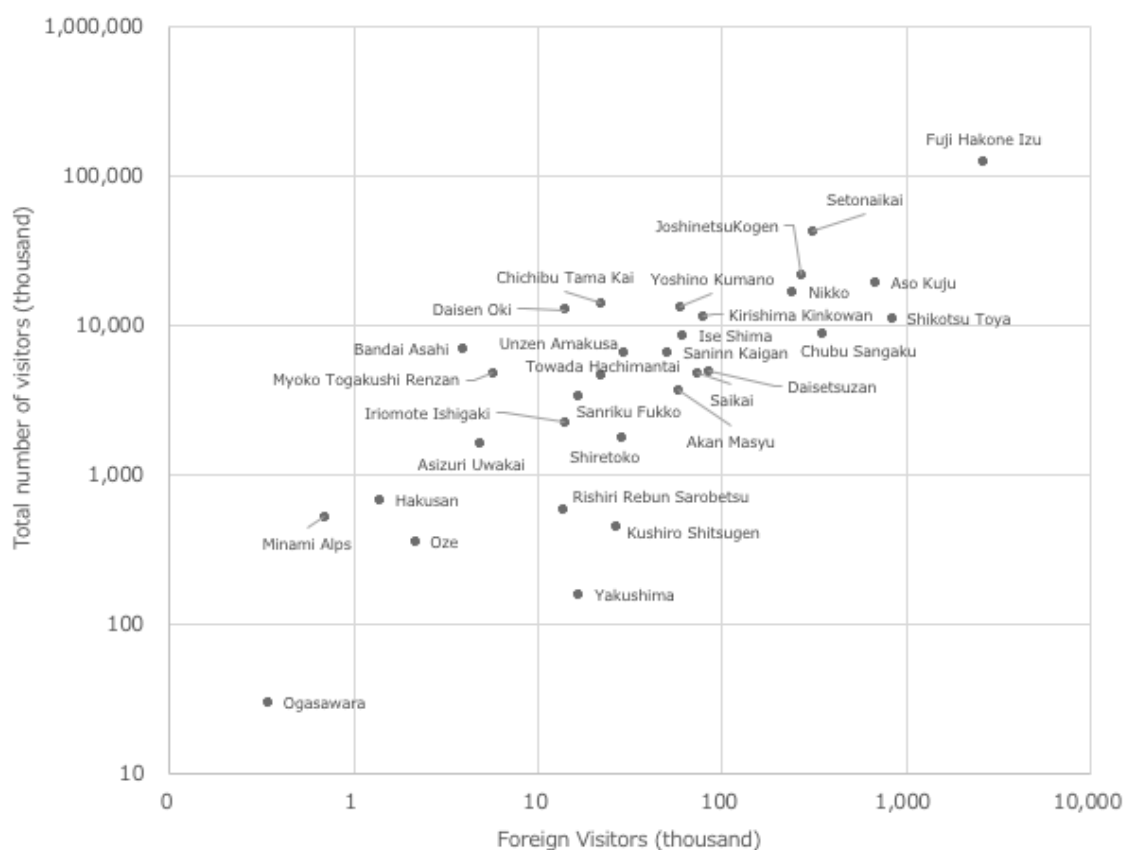


Figure 1. Total number of visitors and foreign visitors in national parks in Japan

We compared the attributes of foreigners who visited and those who did not visit national parks. Of 39,956 respondents, 32,052 (80.2%) did not visit any of the national parks, and 7,904 (19.8%) visited at least one national park. Most visited only one site, but 578 people visited two or more national parks. The national parks were relatively well visited by tourists

from Taiwan, China, Thailand, the United Kingdom, France. Besides, national parks were well visited by females, first-timers, and group tour participants. There were no significant differences between national park visitor and others in overall satisfaction and willingness to revisit to Japan. Visitors to the national parks showed the higher expectation of, the participation rate in, and satisfaction with nature experiences, hot spring bathing, and outdoor activities such as skiing.

As compared with Japanese visitors in Shiretoko National Park, foreigners were visiting regardless of weekends or holidays. They expected natural scenery and experience particular to Shiretoko National Park. Their satisfaction and loyalty were also high. Satisfaction with printed materials, signs, and access was less than it was for other parameters. They expected improvements in the provision of information. There was little expectation for the development of new facilities. Multilingualization of caution signs, printed materials and interpretation boards was desired, especially by visitors from Asian regions.

## Conclusion

The number of foreign visitors to Japan's national parks is increasing. Although nature experiences and hot springs are expected, many parks are infrequently visited, owing to the difficulty of traveling in Japan and the small amount of information provided in foreign languages. Because the satisfaction of current foreign visitors is high, we can expect more visits by improving information provision and domestic travel. Development of resort facilities is not preferred, as preserving the natural environment and providing experiences unique to the national parks is vital.

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