

Visitors' attitudes to the collection of voluntary fees in national parks in Japan

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Introduction

Although the need to charge entrance and usage fees has been recognised for some time now, only a few small protected areas and limited facilities in Japan collect voluntary fees. Charging entrance fees is rare in Japan. Therefore, some managers of facilities such as campgrounds, mountain shelters and toilets have been requesting visitors to pay fees voluntarily. Although, for legal and political reasons, it is not easy for park administrators to charge entrance and usage fees for public facilities, some managers and local stakeholders are considering the collection of fees from visitors because of decreasing park administration budgets and insufficient maintenance of facilities.

Methods for collecting usage fees vary. In some areas, the personnel of park administrators collect entrance fees and in others, visitors place usage fees in unattended donation boxes. Most managers obtain less revenue than expected. Therefore, information about visitor perceptions and attitudes would be helpful for managers (Absher et al. 2008, Park et al. 2010). In this study, we examined hikers' attitudes to voluntary fee collections in Daisetsuzan National Park, Japan, and discussed possible improvements to the current system.

Study area and methods

Daisetsuzan National Park, which is located in the center of Hokkaido Island, is the largest national park in Japan. The gradual mountain range attracts hikers in the short summer season. An entrance fee is charged in only one area, the Sugatami alpine meadow. The amount of money given is at the visitor's discretion. Hikers who stay at Kurodake or Hakuundake shelters are asked by shelter managers to pay accommodation fees (1,500 JPY for Kurodake, 1,000 JPY for Hakuundake). In addition, visitors who use compost toilets at Kurodake are asked to pay a 200 JPY voluntary usage fee each time. These revenues are spent on the costs of employing temporary managers and the maintenance of each facility.

We distributed mail-back questionnaires to hikers at some trailheads and shelters from July to September in 2008. Respondents were asked about their hiking experience, their awareness of the voluntary fees, their actual payments, and their attitudes to voluntary fee collection and the burden of facility maintenance expenses. In total, 1,374 hikers responded, a mail-back response rate of 47.4%.

Results and discussion

Visitors' awareness and payment of voluntary fees were highest for the Kurodake toilet usage fee and lowest for the Sugatami area entrance fee. Rates of fee payment by respondents were less than the awareness rates. The average amount of money paid at the Kurodake toilet was almost half as much as expected. Respondents preferred collections at trailheads or facilities by the personnel in charge rather than unattended donation boxes. They also agreed to collection with the selling of maps or guided tours. It seems difficult to expect more revenue from voluntary fees only. Managers should consider how to improve charging methods or locations.

We also asked respondents about the burden of the expense. Who should defray the cost of maintaining public facilities such as trails, toilets, shelters or parking lots? More respondents

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agreed to defrayment by public funds combined with visitor fees, rather than by either public funds or visitor fees alone. It was considered that fundamental facilities, such as trails, should be maintained by public funds, whereas service facilities that benefited limited numbers of users, such as shelters or toilets, ought to be maintained by usage fees.

Conclusion

Most questionnaire respondents assumed that the burden of park management expenses should be shared between park administrators and visitors. Most respondents think that a public budget is necessary for park management. Furthermore, respondents accepted that they should make individual payments to some extent. It was thought that some facilities should be paid for by park administrators and others by visitors. Introducing fee-charging systems in accordance with visitors' attitudes would improve their willingness to cooperate, and thus the sustainability of facility maintenance.

References

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