Development of hut systems and their influence to visitor flow in Japan's Protected Areas

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Keywords: facility management, hut system, roadless area, trekking, visitor flow

Introduction

Hut systems in diverse wildland for trekking are playing important roles in nature preservation as well as in visitor experiences. Especially under bad weather conditions, suitable placement and management of huts can spell the difference between life and death. On the other hand, their over-development brings overuse problems and resulting environmental deterioration. In other words, the hut system can be a powerful tool to regulate visitor flow and experiences in roadless areas while controlling environmental impacts. Especially in Japan, 75 % of trekkers are over the age of forty (The Data Book of Mountains Editorial Board 2006), and the role of huts are becoming more important. This paper examines validity of hut-system management by analysing their historic development, and then clarifies the relation between their management and user types based on visitor survey results.

Three categories of hut system

There are more than one thousand huts for trekkers in the mountain protected areas of Japan. The same figure can be said of New Zealand with similar climate, but 65 % of huts in Japan are privately owned and have a longer history. The oldest hut in the Northern Japan Alps was constructed in 1617 and used until 1986, when it was protected as a cultural heritage. Some huts in the same park have been enlarged to accommodate more than one thousand visitors a night to meet demands, or two or more huts with different owners concentrated in a certain area. In either case, the overuse problem has become serious.

On the other side, public huts or shelters were constructed in mountain protected areas that were without private huts, especially after the passing the National Park Law, 1931. The revised Nature Parks Law in 1957 stipulated government subsidy to such shelters as one of visitor facilities of parks. Shelters were allocated based on the park management plan. This is a quite a contrast with private huts which were constructed depending only on demands before the park designation. However, the local governments in charge of such public huts did not have the staff or budget to manage them. The result was their deterioration and breakout of environmental problems such as water pollution.

As the third category, in the southern part of the Southern Alps national park, an areas with less trekkers than the Northern Alps, a unique hut management system was introduced in the 1980s. A forest management company rents nine public huts from local governments without a fee, and manages thirteen in total including four owned by the company which provides a shuttle bus service to each trailhead. In short, this hut system is based on public ownership and private management.

Discussion

Japan has an outdoor recreational record back to the early 8th century and even Mt. Fuji was ascended as early as in the 870s. During Edo period (1603 to 1868), ascending Mt. Fuji became popular first as a pilgrimage destination, and then as a sight-seeing trip among ordinary people with more than two thousand visitors every summer. The gateway communities managed both facilities and services. However, it took long time to establish a sustainable management system including visitor safety and satisfaction among profit-oriented local communities (Ito 2007, Ito 2009). Such lessons were not handed over to later hut managers, and those at Mt. Fuji or the

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Northern Alps expanded rapidly. However, because of the trekker decline and of increasing environmental concerns, private hut managers began to decrease the overnight capacities while adopting systematic management (Data Book of Mountains Editorial Board 2006).
On the other hand, the private management of public facilities has a longer history such as concessionaire-managed facilities in U.S. national parks. Unlike these concessionaires, the company in the Southern Alps does not pursue profit, but the visitor survey shows positive response to such a hut system and its management (Kawai 2008). For example, the trekkers in this park prefer about a seven-hour daily walk, and they select routes with such hut intervals. Regarding the shuttle bus service maintained by the hut fee, visitors appreciate it since local government can not supply such service.

Conclusion

In mountain protected areas of Japan with heavy summer rain, the hut system developments have strongly influenced visitor flows. Hut intervals and service standard can be especially used as effective tools to manage visitor numbers as well as experiences and resulting environmental impacts. This hut-based visitor management will be applied to protected areas in other countries (Ito and Kato, 2010)

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