

Building a proactive conservation strategy for Mt Fuji's foreign climbers

Tom Jones, Meiji University Graduate School of Governance Studies, UK, tjones@meiji.ac.jp;

Kiyotatsu Yamamoto, Iwate University, Japan; Shigeo Aramaki, Yamanashi Institute of Environmental Sciences, Japan

Conservation of Mt Fuji's natural and cultural heritage

Mt Fuji is Japan's tallest mountain at 3776m and in 2007 it was added to the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Tentative List, partly due its long history of pilgrimage. Mt Fuji is already designated within Fuji-Hakone-Izu National Park, among the most visited in the world. Yet despite its multiple – and at times overlapping – designations, conservation of natural and cultural heritage is no simple matter. Like the pilgrims of yesteryear, today's climbers take advantage of a short summer window (the official season runs from July 1st to August 26th) when the majority ascend under cover of darkness in time to see the sun rise from the summit. In 2008, the total number of climbers was estimated to have exceeded 400,000 (an average of over 7000 climbers per day) during peak season, with even higher densities on the weekend (Yamamoto et al, 2009). This unique set of circumstances makes it very difficult for Mt Fuji management to proactively convey conservation messages to a 'noncaptive' audience including many young, novice and foreign climbers. Hence this paper aims to review i) the management structure and ii) the foreign climber market, thereby drawing suggestions toward a conservation strategy for Mt Fuji's foreign climbers.

Managing Mt. Fuji's natural and cultural resources

Resource management is often fragmented, and Japan's 'mixed management' system of national park administration is no exception (Hiwasaki, 2005). The Ministry of Environment is the legal park administrator, but faces a number of impediments to holistic management, including lack of land ownership, and insufficient funding and human resources (Imura, 2005). Other central governments are also involved, such as the Forestry Agency which is a significant landowner, but their institutional objectives are not always consistent. Meanwhile designated parkland also overlaps with the administrative territory of 15 municipalities, as well as the two Prefectures of Shizuoka and Yamanashi (MoE, 2000). This complex combination of stakeholders can have the unintended side-effect of pitting government agencies against each other, and against private stakeholders such as the mountain huts who maintain the trails and the Shinto shrine that claims 'ownership' rights over the summit. Unsurprisingly there have been serious discrepancies in the provision of visitor services, undermining attempts to implement management interventions.

However, the recent calls for Fuji's UNESCO designation may have ushered in a new era of cooperation, as demonstrated by a new system of trail signs after a partnership council was formed in March 2009 from a cross-section

of stakeholders. The partnership issued a set of guidelines aimed at standardization of place names, and the removal of unnecessary or low quality signs. The outcome was a simplified system of colour-coded signs along the four main trails, reducing confusion such as one notorious junction on the descending trail where climbers often lost their way and descended on the wrong side of the mountain. The trail signs thus represent the new spirit of cooperation, and have since been introduced in a multi-lingual format that underlines the increased presence of foreign climbers.

Mt. Fuji's foreign climber market

Fuji's international climbers are a segment that has grown rapidly in recent years, although it is still estimated to be less than 10% of the overall market. Nonetheless, management of foreign climbers is a priority for a number of reasons. Firstly, Fuji's global level of recognition is second to none, but language and etiquette barriers on the mountain risk undermining climber experience. More broadly, Fuji is a market leader for Japan's national parks and protected areas, hence strategies implemented here are a de facto benchmark for resource management across the whole country.

Monitoring was conducted every August from 2008–2012, when an English language questionnaire was distributed to climbers descending the Yoshida route, the busiest of the four main trails. Results indicate that male climbers in their 20s from Europe and North America dominate. Almost half live in Japan, and 60–90% use public transport to reach Fuji's 5th station. >90% are first time climbers, and around 80% reach the summit, mostly arriving in time to see the sun rise by not stopping off en route (61%). Climbing information is gleaned from off-site sources, notably the internet and guidebook. On-site information ranks lower, with other climbers more likely to be used than trail signs. Trail signs are playing an important role, but warning signs overshadow those that explain natural or cultural features. Hence although 23% of foreign climbers were motivated to come to Japan by culture or tradition, climbing Fuji is treated as a physical challenge or social adventure, and there is little evidence of heritage perception. Only 37% would be interested in joining an Interpretation Program at the 5th station, although 57% felt the need for an improved Visitor Centre.

Toward a conservation strategy for Mt Fuji's foreign climbers

This paper outlines Fuji's management structure and the foreign climber market to discuss implications for a communication strategy based on proactive conservation. As in many protected areas, Fuji management is complicated by its fragmentation, but a simplified system of colour-coded

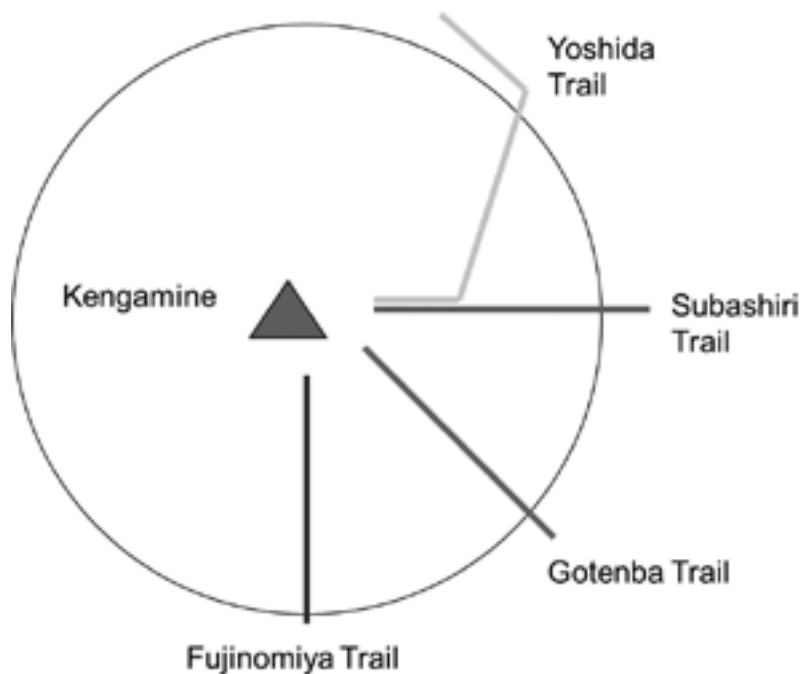


Figure 1. Colour-coded trail system set up in 2009.

signs along the four main trails represents a new spirit of cooperation. However, in terms of modifying the behavior of the target segment, ongoing monitoring suggests off-site channels (especially the internet) would be more effective than on-site ones, although the importance of trail signs is not merely symbolic as analysis shows a predominantly self-guided market. Nonetheless results point to necessary adjustments in trail sign content that can deliver heritage messages effectively, without over-emphasis on utilitarian functions such as warning notices. Given the 'noncaptive' nature of the audience, such natural and cultural heritage interpretation must be enjoyable and relevant (Ham and Krumpel, 1996); it could be complemented by integrated messaging on public transport in tandem with an improved Visitor Centre.

Unlocking the potential of 'mixed-management' parks require cross-cutting partnerships with the capacity for targeted management interventions. It is hoped that the 'carrot' of UNESCO designation can provide a platform to unite diverse stakeholders around such a common vision.

Ham, S.H. and Krumpel E.E., 1996. Identifying audiences and messages for nonformal environmental education – a theoretical framework for interpreters. *Journal of Interpretation Research* 1(1), pp. 11–23.

Hiwasaki, L., 2005. Toward Sustainable Management of National Parks in Japan: Securing Local Community and Stakeholder Participation. *Environmental Management* 35(6), pp. 753–764.

Imura, H., 2005. Japan's Environmental Policy: Institutions and the Interplay of Actors. In *Environmental Policy in Japan*, ed. Imura, H. and Schreuers, M.A. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.

Ministry of Environment (MoE), 2000. Management Plan for Mt Fuji Area. Available through: <http://www.env.go.jp/park/fujiha-kone/intro/files/plan_a_1.pdf> [Accessed 21 July 2012]

Yamamoto, K. Jones, T.E. and Aramaki S., 2009. A study on methods of providing information suited to the attributes of Japanese climbers at Mt. Fuji. *Proceedings of JIIR Annual Conference 24*, pp. 89–92.