

Ecotourism as a medium of promotion and learning Japanese traditional culture

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Citation: Baiquni, T. T. K. & Wiyatasari, R. (2023). Ecotourism as a medium of promotion and learning Japanese traditional culture. *Notion: Journal of Linguistics, Literature, and Culture*, Vol 5(1), p. 82-92. <https://doi.org/10.12928/notion.v5i1.6773>

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received: 4 November 2022

Accepted: 6 May 2023

Keywords:

Japanese

Traditional culture

Ecotourism

Promotion

Learning

ABSTRACT

After going through the pandemic for approximately two years, the enthusiasm of foreign tourists to come to Japan would still high. This proves that tourism is the leading sector of foreign exchange for Japan. Apart from being a foreign exchange, Japan can also promote the uniqueness of their country, including Japanese traditional culture. Japan promotes its traditional culture through one of the concepts of sustainable tourism, which is ecotourism. Ecotourism is not just an activity that prioritizes nature as an attraction but also aims to preserve the environment and improve the cultural welfare of the local community. This study explains the role of ecotourism as a medium for promoting and learning Japanese traditional culture. The method used in this study is a qualitative descriptive method. The results of this study indicate that Japan can promote ecotourism and its traditional culture with collaborations between the stakeholders. Furthermore, tourists can learn about Japanese traditional culture through various activities offered by ecotourism destinations.



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I. INTRODUCTION

Until 2022, the United Nations (UN) recognizes 195 countries worldwide, of which 54 Asian countries are counted, one of which is Japan. Not only is a developed country at the forefront of technology, but Japan is also known as a country that maintains its traditional culture and pop culture. People worldwide are familiar with anime, manga, kimonos, tea ceremonies, origami, sushi, and even Anya Forger, the main character in the Spring 2022

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Anime titled *Spy × Family*, adapted from a manga by Endo Tatsuya. Japan achieves this by introducing its traditional pop culture to the international people, including Indonesia.

To introduce their country, including its culture, the Japanese government makes various efforts like other countries through tourism. According to the data obtained from the Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO), in 2019, Japan received the highest number of foreign visitors of all time, which was around 31 million visitors. Thanks to that, Japan was ranked 5th in 2019 as the country with the most foreign visitors in the Asia Pacific after China, Hong Kong, Thailand, and Macau. The decline in the number of foreign visitors by 99,4 percent in 2020 is one of the domino effects of the spread of Covid-19 and its variants, where the Japanese government must prioritize the safety of their people. Since the end of November 2021, Japan has banned the entry of non-resident foreigners due to a new type of virus determined by the WHO, Omicron. Business people and international students criticized this policy because many were delayed continuing their studies and needs in Japan. In May 2022, officials from the Japanese tourism industry also submitted a formal request to the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport, and Tourism to reopen Japan's borders to foreign tourists. Many requests from foreign tourists who want to travel to Japan prove that tourism is the leading sector of Japan's foreign exchange earner.

The Japanese government understands the role of tourism very well, which is not only a source of state revenue but can also give the impression that their country upholds traditional culture in this modern era. The spread of Japanese traditional culture is supported by one of the concepts of sustainable tourism, ecotourism. Ecotourism is not just an activity that prioritizes nature as an attraction but also aims to preserve the environment and improve the cultural welfare of the local community (Damanik & Weber, 2006). In addition, ecotourism is in line with the principles of sustainable development (SDGs) as a solution for conservation and recreation activities. Ecotourism is one of the media to promote their country and a medium for learning their traditional culture. Japan has successfully upgraded its traditional culture, such as staying in ryokans, visiting shrines, and understanding the customs and cultures of the local people.

Research conducted by Suryaningsih (2018) examines ecotourism as a source of learning Biology and a strategy to increase students' concern for the environment. Suryaningsih wrote that education plays a vital role in providing insight into the sustainable management of the ecotourism environment. The results of this study are due to environmental changes caused by humans themselves; it is necessary to develop teaching materials that make the environment a learning resource. With ecotourism that can add learning experiences to environmental problems, students are also expected to increase their sense of concern for the environment. In addition, Rosliana (2017) examined cultural tourism, which became a tool to strengthen the country's economy in Japan. Her research proves that there are supporting factors that cause an increase in the number of tourists visiting Japan, namely active promotion from both the government and the community, as well as the efforts of the Japanese people to preserve the culture and traditions of their country.

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The difference with the research conducted by Suryaningsih is that this research focuses on the role of ecotourism as a medium for promoting the country and learning traditional culture. In contrast, Suryaningsih's research focuses on ecotourism as a source of learning and the benefits of the learning process, namely a sense of caring for the environment. On the other hand, research conducted by Rosliana focuses on the factors that cause the number of tourists to Japan and its impact on the Japanese economic sector. While this study discusses how Japan promotes ecotourism so that it has become one of the tourism concepts chosen by world tourists to come into contact with nature directly while learning traditional Japanese culture.

II. METHODOLOGY

This research uses descriptive research with a qualitative approach. According to Sugiyono (2013), the qualitative research method is based on post-positivistic philosophy because it follows natural law with results that emphasize meaning and researchers' understanding of the data found in the field. Meanwhile, Moleong (2018) states that qualitative research aims to learn about what is experienced by research subjects, such as behavior, perceptions, and motivations.

Sugiyono also explained three stages in qualitative research: the description or orientation stage, the reduction stage, and the selection stage. In this study, data was collected through the literature study, such as articles and official Japanese government websites. After collecting all data related to ecotourism in Japan, the data will be reduced by selecting fascinating and essential data for this study. In the last stage or the selection stage, the data that has been set will be described in detail. The results of this study will describe the current situation of ecotourism in Japan, how Japan promotes ecotourism, as well as the reasons why ecotourism, plays a role as a medium for learning Japanese traditional culture to answer the problems.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ecotourism in Japan first took place in 1988 in the Ogasawara Islands, located south of Tokyo, as a form of whale watching. Ecotourism in Japan was introduced to promote regional development and natural experiences. In addition, ecotourism in Japan has a close relationship with World Heritage Sites, so aspects of regional development and environmental protection are often debated in areas listed or candidates for World Heritage Sites. The first step to further introduce ecotourism was the two-year survey conducted by the Ministry of the Environment to make ecotourism a national initiative in 1991. The Ministry of the Environment selected five pilot areas for the study: Shiretoko, Tateyama, Okunikko, Hachijojima, and Yakushima. Yakushima Island is a Japanese World Heritage Site first recognized in 1993 and has become a thriving national and international ecotourism destination (Song & Kuwahara, 2016).

As of July 2021, 25 properties have been registered as World Heritage Sites in Japan, including Yakushima Island, Historic Villages of Shirakawa-go and Gokayama, Buddhist and Shinto Shrines in Nikko, and the most recently registered Joumon Prehistoric Site in Hokkaido, among many others. Most of Japan's World Heritage Site properties are categorized as

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ecotourism destinations because they fit the concept of sustainable tourism. Apart from World Heritage Sites, Japan offers many other ecotourism destinations for foreign tourists.

Current Situation of Ecotourism in Japan

Before sustainable tourism, Japan was always mentioned as a must-visit country for traveling among global travelers. Japan is a country with diverse natural conditions because it is an archipelago that stretches from north to south and is surrounded by the sea. The natural beauty of the 47 prefectures has its uniqueness, making Japan one of the most attractive countries for tourists. According to data released by JNTO (The Japan National Tourism Organization), Japan earned around 46.1 billion dollars or equivalent to about 665 billion rupiahs, thanks to the spending of foreign tourists who visited Japan in 2019. This makes Japan the world's third-largest tourism market contributor after the United States and China.

The decline of the tourism sector over the past few years has been a concern in many countries, including Japan. Tourism that aligns with the UN Sustainable Development Goals is the answer to this concern. The UN World Tourism Organization continues to encourage countries to embrace the concept of sustainable tourism or ecotourism. To support the global target, JNTO created a policy to promote ecotourism in Japan that will contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A survey conducted by Booking.com in 2021 revealed that 83% of global travelers think sustainable tourism is essential, with 61% saying that the pandemic has made them want to travel sustainably in the future.

JNTO revealed that they want to make Japan in the post-Covid-19 era a preferred tourist destination for travelers around the world through the concept of sustainable tourism. The downturn in the tourism sector has allowed Japan to consider more effective measures to achieve this vision. JNTO offers outdoor activities with accommodation that coexist with nature, thus encouraging travelers who are conscious of protecting the environment to include such destinations in their travel plans.

The rapid growth of tourism worldwide is also why Japan is aggressively improving ecotourism quality. The number of tourists who continue to visit some tourist destinations does not have a good impact. It reduces tourist satisfaction and the quality of tourist sites, which is called the phenomenon of "over-tourism" and "sightseeing pollution." On the other hand, productive-age people who previously lived in villages are moving to cities in droves to find decent jobs or age-appropriate lifestyles, so the number of visitors to big cities is increasing. During 2014-2019, the Japan Ecotourism Center conducted various activities to raise the level of sustainable tourism in Japan to international standards.

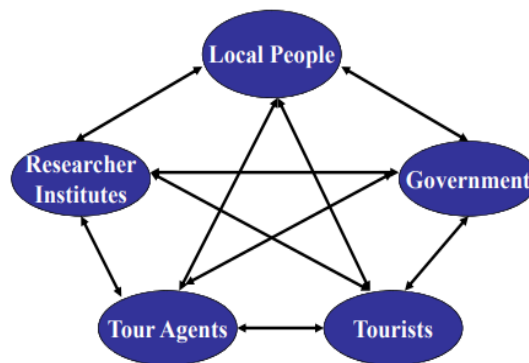
The Ministry of Environment argues that ecotourism has a variety of positive impacts, such as bringing together travelers for a travel 'experience' and providing opportunities for millennial youth to experience 'real' nature. Ecotourism also benefits tourism with tourists who can stay longer and even avoid declining visitors during certain seasons. In addition, ecotourism plays a significant role in raising the awareness of both tourists and local communities about the importance of preserving nature. Also, ecotourism helps the local community's economy, where most residents are older people who are most likely unable to work in the fields and others (Imagawa & Harrison, 2021).

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How Japan Promotes Ecotourism

The Japanese government launched a particular policy called the Ecotourism Promotion Act in 2007, where the Ecotourism Promotion Council is the governing body of ecotourism in Japan. In this case, the Ecotourism Promotion Board involves local government officials, communities, and academics. To organize ecotourism activities following local culture and natural sites in each region, members are associated with 17 local organizations (Fukamachi, 2017). Since the policy was launched, research has surged and varies from the community, conservation, and traditional knowledge to the benefits of the ecotourism industry (Sisriany & Furuya, 2020). The Ecotourism Promotion Council defines ecotourism as responsible travel that allows travelers to experience and learn about the natural environment, history, and culture. Japan Travel Bureau (JTB) explained that there is a difference between "nature tourism," which is an activity of just going and seeing. At the same time, "ecotourism" is an activity of studying nature and local people's way of life and culture. In addition, "ecotourism" also aims to attract foreign visitors or tourists.

Ecotourism is divided into at least four categories which are nature tourism, such as whale watching in the Ogasawara Islands; environmental tourism, such as school trips aimed at cleaning up the Kamogawa River in Kyoto; school tourism, such as national park study tours or conservation studies; and premium tourism aimed at raising revenue for conservation (Yoshida, 1997). Meanwhile, Mowforth (1992) identified four types of alternative tourism activities related to ecotourism: environment/nature, culture, adventure, and specialists (Jurowski, 2010). According to Maita and Kaizu (1997), ecotourism involves cooperation between interested parties depicted in a pentagon diagram, as shown in the picture below. The five parties are intertwined and work together to run ecotourism (Buckley, 2012).



Picture 1. Ecotourism Pentagon (Collaboration of Stakeholders)

In order to promote ecotourism, the government plays a vital role because many stakeholders are influenced by the government and need support from the government so that ecotourism can run well. The government uses ecotourism to solve the problems of urbanization, population decline, the excessive number of visitors, and other environmental issues. The State Tourism Promotion Basic Plan was also created to include the responsibility of all governments to develop sustainable tourism areas and the protection, cultivation, and development of tourism resources related to culture, history, and nature. The government also subsidizes some communities that promote ecotourism and sends expert advisors to advise according to the needs of each community. In addition, the government tries to develop

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community resources by conducting training that focuses on ecotourism issues and history and tradition, resource management, public relations, and business management. The government even created an annual award called The Ecotourism Grand Prize that aims to increase motivation and information exchange, an ecotourism charter, and much more.

The times also require academics to research new things and develop previous research. Based on the bibliography taken from Scopus, there are 35 studies related to ecotourism in Japan which is much lower than in Indonesia. Still, research in Japan has started earlier and consistently since 2002 (Sisriany & Furuya, 2020). Before Japan intensified ecotourism, research related to ecotourism was relatively small. However, since the policy governing ecotourism was published in 2007, the number of studies on ecotourism has increased and started to vary. This certainly impacts both domestic and foreign researchers and has become a medium for promoting Japanese ecotourism to the international community.

On the other hand, local communities have the role of promoting ecotourism by forming an Ecotourism Promotion Council, which can apply for accreditation from the government (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, 2010). As of June 2016, seven separate organizations have been certified with the following activities (Ministry of the Environment 2016).

- Tanigawadake in Gunma Prefecture includes trekking, geographical feature study, historical study of Shimizu Mountain pass, stargazing, and wildlife observation.
- Hanno City in Saitama Prefecture includes visiting a sake brewery, hiking, food tours, forest bathing, and handicraft experiences, visiting old folk houses, and agricultural experiences.
- Nantan-shi Miyama in Kyoto Prefecture includes deer hunting and slaughtering, hay work experience, temple experiences, and trekking.
- Toba City in Mie Prefecture includes sightseeing using glass-bottomed boats, snorkeling, fishing excursions, trips to uninhabited islands, and off-road strolling.
- Nabari City in Mie Prefecture includes Satoyama trips, a hermitage sitting under waterfalls, climbing a mountain to observe the changing leaves in fall, visiting ice waterfalls in winter, and watching ninja training.
- Tokashiki and Zamami villages in Okinawa Prefecture include whale watching, sea kayaking, scuba diving, and snorkeling.
- Ogasawara in Tokyo Prefecture includes whale watching, dolphin watching, trekking, night tours, diving, and sea kayaking.

The Ecotourism Promotion Council should create an overall ecotourism plan, implement it, check its progress regularly, assess it, and revise it if necessary. The municipal government, which is part of the Ecotourism Promotion Council, organizes the boards in each region, creates a general framework, and manages the council. With the collaboration between the parties related to the Ecotourism Promotion Council, the general framework was established, publicly disclosed, and presented to the cabinet minister.

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One of the plans of the Ecotourism Promotion Council is to create a training program for tour guides as they are also part of the Ecotourism Promotion Council. Introducing and training tour guides is one of the main focuses of government efforts to promote ecotourism in Japan. The Ministry of the Environment (2004) revealed that a large part of the Manual for Promoting Ecotourism focuses on tour guiding, outlining how to design and present tour guides, and introducing non-personal interpretation techniques, such as brochures, signage, and self-guided trails (Yamada, 2011). Ecotourism guides should fulfill eight functions, namely acting as a guide who educates participants about nature and culture, following a code of conduct toward tourists, raising awareness about how to protect the environment, enabling communication between local communities and tourists, and help to convey information about the environment, culture, and ecotourism programs to people outside the area (Imagawa, 2021).

Efforts to promote ecotourism are also carried out by travel agents who are also part of the Ecotourism Promotion Council. Travel agencies located all over the world play an important role in ecotourism marketing. Starting from 1985, when the Japan Travel Bureau (JTB) campaigned to beautify tourism spots and preserve tourism resources, it started offering a tour called "Fabre" which targeted travelers interested in environmental issues and nature-contact tourism in 2002. In 2008, JTB launched an eco-friendly tour called "Love Earth" and introduced a carbon offset system. On the other hand, Japan's second-largest travel agency, H.I.S., also promotes ecotourism both domestically and overseas while designing tours specifically for solo travelers. Other companies such as Picchio won the Ecotourism Grand Prize in 2005 and offer activities focusing on wildlife conservation and environmental education, as well as projects that support ecotourism. In addition, the internet makes it easy for global travelers to choose from various ecotourism tours offered by travel agencies.

The role that domestic and global tourists' role in promoting Japan's ecotourism is equally essential. Every year, millions of people from all over the world travel to Japan and become important stakeholders in ecotourism because they generate revenue for the tourism and ecotourism sectors. Almost all people in the world can access the internet and get information quickly with the internet. Domestic tourists utilize this to share their ecotourism trips with the world, such as writing feedback on ecotourism destination pages or publishing articles on their blog pages. Various social media platforms are also used to promote sustainable tourism trips, such as Instagram and TikTok, in the form of short videos or even on YouTube, where people can make longer videos to review the destinations, making it easier for overseas tourists to access information.

The role of stakeholders is very important in promoting ecotourism and their relationship is mutually beneficial. Without good cooperation between the stakeholders, Japanese ecotourism may not be implemented and promoted properly.

Reasons for Ecotourism as a Medium for Learning Japanese Traditional Culture

Since long ago, Japan has been known as a country that values its culture, both its pop culture and its traditional culture. One of the reasons is that family ties are strong in Japan and bind not only the extended living family but also generations of ancestors. Japanese people also prioritize harmony and hard work, which has been a part of them since childhood. Harmony became vital in Japan because Japan was called "Wakoku", a name

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that referred to Japan during ancient Chinese dynasties. "Wakoku" was made up of the kanji 'Wa' and 'Koku', which literally means "obedient country" in Chinese, but the Japanese later changed the meaning of the kanji 'Wa' to "harmony". Since that, harmony has been an essential part of Japanese life. Japan's rich culture and vast nature create space for various ecotourism activities, such as going to hot springs, mountain climbing, skiing, dolphin and whale watching, diving, rafting, visiting ancient forests, and visiting temples or shrines. Jansson & Mikkola (2016) states that many of these activities have become popular among Japanese people. There are also cultural ecotourism activities in Japan that include activities such as tea ceremonies, festivals, and performances.

The concept of ecotourism has become a selling point for Japan to promote tourism that is directly in contact with nature and a medium for tourists to learn Japanese traditional culture. The main reason ecotourism can be a medium for learning traditional Japanese culture is that most ecotourism destinations also include activities that are in contact with culture, especially in historical locations or those that are thick with culture, such as World Heritage Sites.

The concept of cultural heritage has evolved according to the cultural traditions of each country. Generally, what is considered cultural heritage are movable (paintings, sculptures, coins, etc.) and immovable objects (monuments, archaeological sites, etc.), as well as intangible attributes (oral traditions, performing arts, rituals, etc.). Meanwhile, natural heritage refers to natural sites with cultural aspects such as cultural landscapes and physical, biological, or geological formations. Most sites in Japan represent a combination of several characteristics, as in the case of Shirakawa-go (Singh, 2017).

Shirakawa-go and Gokayama, a group of three villages (Ogimachi, Suganuma, and Ainokura), is one of Japan's most popular tourist destinations. In addition to experiencing nature-contact tourism, tourists can learn about the history and traditional culture attached to this village. The appeal of Shirakawa-go and Gokayama lies in the farmhouses called 'gassho-zukuri', which are designed to withstand heavy snow drifts with their high thatched roofs. The term 'gassho-zukuri' refers to two hands joined together when praying, so the design of this house reminds people to give thanks to the gods who helped them in farming so that they could continue living. There is also Shirakawa Hachiman Shrine which was built for a local deity and hosts the Doburoku Festival every October 14th and 15th. During this festival, villagers pray and give thanks for the village's harvest, safety, and peace and make offerings of *doburoku* to the Gods. *Doburoku* is a type of raw sake with a sharp flavor and is very thick so that it can be eaten and drunk. The six-day festival includes sake drinking, lion dance performances, and other entertainment. Travelers unable to attend the festival in person can visit the Doburoku Festival Hall, located right next to Shirakawa Hachiman Shrine. The museum is open during the winter season and features all the props and costumes from the festival itself, along with artifacts from the area's history.

There are also Tokai and Hokuriku Shinetsu areas accessible by train from Tokyo that offer sustainable tourism. With activities such as farming, tea planting, fruit picking, and learning about domestic products such as wasabi, it is an excellent option for tourists to learn about agriculture and *omotenashi* customs. In addition, tourists can also enjoy the beauty of Mount Fuji by paragliding, travelers can also take a washi paper-making class in Echizen in Fukui

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Prefecture. Washi paper is often used in Buddhist sutras, scrolls, stationery, lampshades, screens, and other similar items. With these activities, tourists can learn first-hand how washi paper is made, as well as get to know traditional Japanese culture.

The variety of tours offered by each ecotourism destination provides an opportunity for tourists to learn Japanese culture directly and indirectly. In addition, following one of the functions that must be fulfilled by tour guides, namely to convey culture to tourists, the role of tour guides is also the reason why ecotourism can be a medium for learning traditional Japanese culture. The selected and trained tour guides are in charge of guiding tourists when traveling on ecotourism, as well as getting to know Japanese culture.

IV. CONCLUSION

Since the Covid-19 pandemic hit the world, Japan has been one of the countries affected, especially in the tourism sector, which is the primary source of state revenue. To overcome this, the concept of sustainable tourism or ecotourism is the answer. Ecotourism has been developing for a long time, but due to the pandemic, the Japanese government is increasingly aggressively carrying out plans to make the concept of tourism in line with the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Seeing how tourists around the world are starting to understand tourism problems and want a trip that is in contact with nature, the Japanese government took advantage of the situation to promote Japanese ecotourism.

The collaboration of the stakeholders makes the promotion of ecotourism, and its journey can be carried out well. The parties who act as stakeholders carry out their respective duties and synergize with each other to promote ecotourism in Japan according to their realm—starting from the government, which plays a significant role in promoting ecotourism to the tourists themselves. With the development of the times, getting the information needed is also getting more accessible and affordable. Ecotourism is not only a solution for the Japanese government to deal with the decline in the tourism sector after the Covid-19 pandemic but also a realm for tourists to learn about Japanese culture, especially its traditional culture. Through various tours offered, most ecotourism destinations in Japan are always related to Japanese cultures such as Shirakawa-go and Gokayama Village. Support from tour guides who are also tasked with explaining culture also plays a vital role in making ecotourism a medium for learning traditional Japanese culture.

Today, there are still many people who are not familiar with the concept of sustainable tourism. Still, with the cooperation between stakeholders, ecotourism will become a superior tourism concept compared to tourism destinations that are starting to experience problems in Japan.

DECLARATION

Author contribution: I confirm that all authors listed on the title page have contributed significantly to the work, have read the manuscript, attest to the validity and legitimacy of the data and its interpretation, and agree to its submission.

Conflict of interest: I confirm that all authors of the manuscript have no conflict of interests to declare.

Additional information: I declare that I shall not submit the paper for publication in any other Journal or magazine until the decision is made by Journal Editors.

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