

Revitalising Rural Communities through Experience-based Education Tours for Elementary and Junior High School Students

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summary

There are various kinds of soft approaches to developing rural communities and revitalizing local areas, and one of the most representative examples of these approaches is Green Tourism. Some farming communities in Japan have been supporting the local revitalization efforts by accepting elementary and junior high students, etc. as part of an Education Tour. Education tours are one of the main forms of GT. Also, the government is currently promoting the "Children & Agricultural Communities Interaction Project", which aims to provide the students of approximately 23,000 elementary schools nationwide with an opportunity to experience a 1-week stay in one of approximately 500 farming communities in Japan.

In this paper, the series of farming experience programs for students has been named "Experience-based Education Tour", and actual impact of these trips on the agricultural management and rural coordinating organization, the economic and social benefits to the participating rural communities, as well as the challenges and prospects for the future will be reviewed and examined.

The main destinations of School Trips in the past have been historical places, landmarks and museums. However, "experience-based tours" are becoming more and more prevalent as the purpose of trips themselves change, i.e. the shift to more personalized, downsized, and specialized trips. In particular, for the "Agricultural Experience", which includes a home-stay at the farm household, there is a demand for a "real-life experience" that takes into consideration the educational aspects of the trip.

In this paper, examples of the Experience-based Education Tour in Iida and Kitakata are provided. Kitakata mainly focuses on one-day farm experience programs, and it responds proactively to the students' pre & post-study for the School Trip. On the other hand, Iida focuses on experience programs that include an overnight home-stay with the farmer. Their programs are supported by 500 farm households.

Looking at the ripple effect on the farm households and communities, both economic and non-economic benefits can be observed. Regarding the economic benefits, farm households can make up to 500,000 yen of extra income for participating in experience programs that include an overnight stay(s). Also, an improvement in farm labor efficiency and an increase in direct sales of their products can also be observed in some cases. Regarding the non-economic benefits, many households say that they "received a present called energy" from the children, through the relationships established during the work in the fields and exchange of letters.