

New Trends Among Organizations that Support Rural Tourism in France

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1. Introduction

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, less crowded travel destinations, such as rural villages, are expected to become more popular. Since 2017, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries of Japan has been promoting “Countryside Stay,” which promotes trips to rural areas where tourists can stay overnight and enjoy meals and experiences that make use of the rich resources in rural areas. The term “green tourism” is well known in Japan; however, compared to conventional green tourism, rural tourism such as Countryside Stay requires more economic independence, although it is still a community-based initiative (Ohe, 2019). It has been pointed out that in order to ensure the sustainability of rural tourism, it is necessary to develop a stable system for its promotion. Furthermore, “intermediate promotion and support organizations” (hereinafter referred to as “intermediate organizations”) that organically interlink the government, private companies, and residents are important (Aoki, 2010). Therefore, in order to promote Countryside Stay as a sustainable form of rural tourism in the future, it is important to aim for its economic independence and to have intermediary organizations that can support it.

France, a country with one of the longest histories of rural tourism in Europe, where rural tourism is already an established style of tourism, can be taken as a case study. In France, organizations that support rural tourism have been in existence for a long time; in particular, these organizations provide a variety of support measures to farmers who have integrated agritourism (hereinafter, “AT”) into their business, such as by providing facilities for accommodation and agricultural experiences. However, in recent years, in the face of competition from online travel agencies (hereinafter “OTAs”), such as Booking.com and Airbnb, intermediate organizations have launched new initiatives. This report discusses the results of a survey that examined trends noticed in French intermediate organizations in order to provide reference for the future promotion of Countryside Stays in Japan.

2. Rural Tourism in France

According to the French Agricultural Census 2010, AT is defined as all activities that include accommodation (B&Bs, holiday houses, camping, etc.), meals, and spending leisure time (educational farm visits, sports activities, recreational activities, farm visits, etc.). In France, 13,800 farmers are involved in AT, of which 9,500 are involved in overnight AT (Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Forestry France, 2013). As of October 2018, 1,461 AT farms were listed on the website of the intermediate organization “Bienvenue à la ferme,” which will be discussed below, and many of these AT farms provided lodging rented out as a whole house. The map shows that AT farms are distributed all over France. In particular, they tend to be distributed in the mountainous and coastal areas of south-central France, and 16.7% of all AT farms are located in natural parks (Figure). Therefore, it is thought that AT farms are located in rural areas with rich natural landscapes.

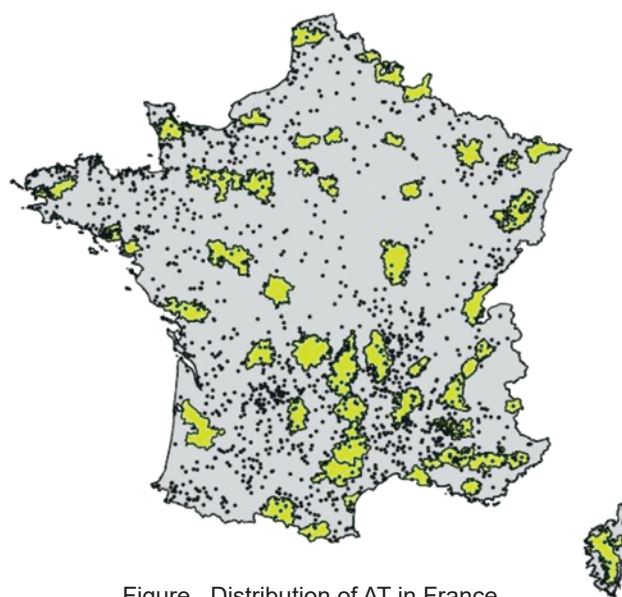


Figure. Distribution of AT in France

Source: Created by the author, based on the website Tous à la ferme
Note: The dots are AT farms, and the yellow-green areas are regional natural parks.

3. Intermediate Organizations and New Trends

In France, organizations promoting rural tourism include “Gîtes de France,” a network of guesthouses, as well as “Bienvenue à la ferme,” “Accueil Paysan,” “La Fédération Française des Stations Vertes de Vacances et des Villages de Neige,” and “Les Plus Beaux Villages de France” (Inoue, 2002). In particular, “Bienvenue à la ferme” was established in 1988 by the Chamber of Agriculture with the aim of popularizing farm management, dairy farming, agricultural product processing, and exchange and

tourism. The organization actively supports AT farmers in France by creating manuals for farmers wishing to pursue AT and a portal site that introduces the AT provided by its members. However, in recent years, tourists have used OTAs to decide their travel destinations and plan accommodation based on the comments and reviews found on OTA websites. Therefore, it is less beneficial to pay a membership fee to join an intermediate organization, and their membership numbers have thus declined. In fact, according to field research conducted in March 2020, the AT farmers we interviewed now mainly use OTAs such as Booking.com to attract customers.

These advances in OTAs have led to concerns about intermediate organizations losing users. In 2017, Airbnb, a competitor of intermediate organizations; MiiMOSA, a crowdfunding company specializing in agriculture; and the intermediate organization “Bienvenue à la ferme” collaborated and signed a partnership agreement to collectively provide AT support. In this partnership, “Bienvenue à la ferme” provided management support through diversification of farm income and added value, Airbnb conducted AT market analyses and handled promotion, and MiiMOSA provided financial support. From 2018 to 2021, a call for project applications was issued every year, and a total of 41 projects were selected. The funds were used for agricultural diversification, maintenance of farmland, development of processed products, and capital investment in educational farms (Table). Furthermore, a website was launched called “Tous à la ferme” where visitors could submit their applications and browse the selected projects.

The fundraising role of MiiMOSA in this partnership is considered to be particularly significant. MiiMOSA is a crowdfunding platform that was established in 2015 to support the food and agriculture industry, and it deals with a wide range of agriculture-related projects in addition to AT. As of March 2020, the platform had hosted 2,500 projects and raised a total of 20 million euros. According to a MiiMOSA representative, this fundraising has led to an increase in farmers’ confidence in the platform. As part of the partnership, MiiMOSA’s dedicated team also supports project applications, from the creation of the project application plan to its implementation.

Table. Tous à la ferme’s AT campaign selection

Year of selection	Number of selections	Project contents
2018	11	educational experiences for children with disabilities, vineyard and farm maintenance, educational workshops, etc.
2019	10	AT cottage construction, educational farm facility development, etc.
2020	10	Production of processed livestock products, regeneration of vineyards, development of educational farms and ecotourism facilities, etc.
2021	10	Educational farms, AT facilities, etc.

Source: Created by the author, based on the website Tous à la ferme (accessed January 2022)

4. Conclusion

OTAs are now the most common platform for travelers to learn about travel destinations and accommodation. However, Countryside Stay is a community initiative and requires the coordination of participating farmers and other stakeholders with the community and government agencies. As such, the presence of intermediate organizations is important. Moreover, financial and operational support is essential for farmers who want to provide Countryside Stays. Examples of complex AT support, such as in management, promotion, and fundraising, will prove beneficial, as will the cooperation of intermediate organizations, OTAs, and crowdfunding organizations, such as in France, which have been discussed in this paper.

Finally, if you would like to know more about this report, please refer to the project research materials published on the website of the Policy Research Institute, Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries.

[Research Report]

Kunii, D., Hirakata, K., and Suda, F. (2022) Agritourism in France, Policy Research Institute, Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, *ICT Revitalization Project [Countryside Stays] Research Materials No.2*.
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