

## Island tourism in Japan: can the diversity of islands create diversity in tourism?

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### Abstract

Islands offer some of the most attractive destinations in worldwide tourism through their unique combination of natural and cultural factors. However, the focus is mainly on their potential for sun, sea, and sand tourism. Research on islands in Japan, on the other hand, has traditionally focused on the uniqueness of each island and the challenges they face as less-favoured areas. Recent years have witnessed the emergence of specialized tourism forms like art tourism, cycling tourism and ecotourism, each restricted to individual islands or island groups. Among the success stories, the involvement of actors from outside the islands appears as a decisive factor, but a closer look reveals dense and multifaceted networks between different actors on and off the islands. The pandemic posed a special threat to these new developments, but also new chances for islands as ideal destinations for microtourism. Can the uniqueness and diversity of islands in Japan become a model for diverse and possibly sustainable island tourism after the pandemic?

### Keywords

Island tourism  
Japan  
Actor networks

### Islands and tourism

Islands offer some of the most attractive destinations in worldwide tourism through their unique combination of natural and cultural factors. But are islands really unique regional units? We could argue "yes", because they are distinguished by characteristic ecosystems and rich nature, traditional ways of life and a variety of languages and cultures, difficult access, restricted resources like water or energy, marine environment, peripheral location, and a distinctive (tourism) image as "a place apart". On the other hand, "island" is just one type of regional division, like "valley" or "mountain", and even continents (e.g. Australia) are islands - so where should we draw the border? It is probably a combination of some of these factors that differentiate islands from other locations (Miyachi 2006, Rifai 2017, Modica and Uysal 2016).

The connection between islands and tourism, as pointed out by Andriotis (2004), Forbes (2012), and Gracy & Maher (2018), includes merits like employment, stabilized population, preservation of nature and culture, increased leisure opportunities and the chance to create innovations. Issues arise from seasonal concentration and the unstable employment it creates, the significant environmental footprint of tourist activities, accessibility, changes in local society and culture, and external dependency. Sustainable tourism, just to confirm, increases merits and tries to address issues.

Special challenges for islands arise from climate change through sea-level rise, changes in the marine environment, and extreme weather events influencing access. The COVID 19 pandemic created a dilemma between the need for tourists out of economic dependence on tourism and the danger visitors posed due to limited access to medical resources, especially for aging populations on remote islands in Japan. Within the limited space and limited resources on islands, overtourism also affects islands more severely.

Chances for islands include their uniqueness and resourcefulness, based on the effective use of limited natural resources, the possibility to create tourism products from traditional industries, and the experience of combining multiple

jobs and activities throughout the seasons. The pandemic also offered new possibilities through the increased popularity of outdoor activities and the control of visitor numbers through access, thus offering a perceived remote and safe space.

When discussing islands, we need to consider to what degree all islands are similar. Gracy & Dodds (2010, 33) and Liang (2017, 548) pointed out that in the tourists' imagination, they ARE similar, symbolizing slow life, escape from routine, and tourism focused on sun, water, and beach.

However, a closer look will reveal differences in climate, tourism resources, landscapes, and tourist activities, which would allow for a basic categorization into warm-water, cold-water, and in-between islands (partly based on Gracy & Maher 2018, 248). Additionally, the degrees of (in)dependence, accessibility, popularity, and economic development also vary greatly, so that the chances and challenges need to be analyzed for each island.

### Islands and island research in Japan

Now let us turn to the islands in Japan. In 2015, Japan counted 418 inhabited islands (except the 5 main islands, MLITT, 2015), of which 260 fall under the Remote Island Promotion Law. Together, they make up 0.33% of the Population and in 2010, the rate of the population over the age of 65 was 35.3%.

Island research in Japan traditionally focused on ethnographic studies on individual islands that emphasized uniqueness, with few theoretical or national studies. Several waves of island research occurred in parallel to social developments. Research is focused on Southern islands, especially after the return of Okinawa to Japan in 1972. The Remote Island Promotion Law introduced in 1955 positions islands as disadvantaged regions, a discourse that has since dominated research. Major research themes focused on agriculture, settlements, population, and fishery, while tourism has made strong appearances during the resort development boom in the 1980s and the promotion of ecotourism in the 2000s (Miyachi, 2014). Unique research on islands culminated in the start of Nissology (study of islands) in the 1990s from Okinawa (Kakazu 2018).

## Island tourism diversity

If we look at Island diversity in Japan, we can identify different types. I would like to explain each type with some examples.

Miyajima Island in Hiroshima prefecture has been a longtime favorite among tourists. As a "sacred" island, with its red torii gate standing in the sea, it has a high image value internationally and is the most visited island by the Japanese (Funck 2020). A diverse mix of cultural and natural attractions has appealed to shifting target groups, from school trips to international tourists and recently to microtourism under the pandemic. The diversification of tourism products, investments, and work styles has helped to keep the island as a fixed point on the tourist map.

The Southern Islands include the island chains South of Kyushu. Influences from outside the islands, national media and movies in the case of Yoron Island (Kanda 2021), or investors from the mainland in Okinawa, have shaped the image of resort islands, which is most closely aligned to the international perception of sunny island paradises.

Iconic islands have established themselves as representatives of one type of tourism, for example, ecotourism on Yakushima Island and art tourism on Naoshima Island. In both cases, a strong trigger from outside — World Natural Heritage registration on Yakushima, the construction of museums, and the International Setouchi Art Festival on Naoshima — set in motion a long-term development process that further attracted lifestyle migrants, bringing new business ideas to the islands. As both islands are independent municipalities, local and regional governments also became involved.

Island chains face a different challenge as they have to create coherent images, often across administrative boundaries. While the Shimanami Island Route between Hiroshima and Ehime Prefecture has achieved worldwide fame as a cycling paradise partly due to the involvement of an international cycling company, the Goto Island chain in Nagasaki prefecture still struggles for cohesion despite the successful registration of its Christian churches as World Cultural Heritage.

A recent trend in island diversity, originally triggered by the increase of international tourists to Japan since 2012, but further encouraged through the need for separate spaces under the pandemic, is the development of luxury retreats. The islands of the Seto Inland Sea, densely inhabited and home to fishery, agriculture, and ship building industries, had not experienced this type of development until the combination of a luxury hotel with a museum arrived in Naoshima Island in the 1990s. In recent years, glamping facilities have appeared like mushrooms, a luxury cruise hotel ship tours the islands and on Ikuchijima Island, a historic building has been converted into a luxury hotel according to international standards. In the latter case, the developer aims to set in motion a process of image building and *machizukuri* (community building) in cooperation with local stakeholders. The integration of these luxury retreats with local communities and regional tourism remains an important task for the future.

## Islands in the global tourism competition

Based on these examples, how can islands survive in the global competition for tourists? Based on and extended from Graci & Maher (2018), we can emphasize three points. First, developing a holistic and comprehensive approach to tourism will help to foster diversity within the island. Second, innovating and reinventing when necessary while utilizing technology and innovation for management is a process that is greatly encouraged by diverse actors from outside the island. Finally, activating resourcefulness for indigenous development will

create diversity between islands and distinguish each island among the world-wide competition. The diversity of conditions and approaches of Japanese islands offers a glimpse into the multifarious possibilities to depart from a restricted role of islands as sun, sea, and beach destinations.

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