

Sustainable Systems of Agri-tourism in a Cherry-growing Area: A Case Study of the Miizumi Area, Sagae City

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1. Introduction

Agri-tourism is a type of agricultural enterprise combining farming and tourism, which strategically attracts many tourists and leads to the sales of agricultural products. Agri-tourism was often considered a disincentive in maintaining regional agriculture in major growing areas with an existing distribution system and that markets and consumers evaluate. This attitude comes from the commonly held opinion that the best market-business method is the securing of large-lot farm products. However, the high publicity and evaluation becomes the source of consumption and tourism demand, and the demand of direct selling and picking is very high. In major growing areas, farms engaged in agri-tourism need various considerations and adjustments to other farms and/or the agricultural cooperative.

In this paper, I will clarify sustainable systems of agri-tourism. The study area is Sagae City, Murayama Region of Yamagata Prefecture, which is the largest cherry-growing area in Japan, and has long promoted agri-tourism.

Agricultural production in 2005 was 8.3 billion yen, of which fruit accounted for 50.5% (4.2 billion yen). Sagae City and Giresun City in the Republic of Turkey became sister cities, because cherries originated in this region. In 1992, a theme park named The Cherry Land opened and still plays an important role in promoting industry, culture, and tourism in the region.

2. Characteristics of Agri-tourism in Sagae City

In Sagae city, cherry picking was started in the latter half of 1960s when some farmers received tourists through a travel company of Sendai city. Then, in the 1980s, a window of agri-tourism was included in the agricultural cooperative to correspond to tourism demand and to unify service and pricing of many pick-your-own farms.

At cherry harvest time, the agricultural cooperative arranged for media to focus on the cherry of Sagae city and aimed at the new business development of market and the improvement of publicity. In Sagae City, there are six cherry-picking groups. The Miizumi Cherry-Picking Group is the largest in terms of tourists and sales. Therefore, I will discuss agri-tourism in the Miizumi area.

3. Succession and Sharing of Cultivation Technique among Farmers

In 2007, there were 15 farms in the Miizumi Cherry-Picking Group. After the 1990s, this group has gathered about 20,000 tourists every year. This is a result of leaders' strategy. Mr. W, the leader of cherry picking group, believed it was indispensable to the promotion of agri-tourism and regional agriculture to raise the evaluation of the cherry of the Miizumi area, regardless of agri-tourism. He organized the "Miizumi accepted pruning group" and "Miizumi cherry club", and aimed for the training of successors in this area and the improvement of cultivation techniques. As a result, farmers won the highest awards in many competitive shows and contests, and the Miizumi area was evaluated as a growing area that cultivated cherries of high quality.

This improved the publicity for the growing area, letting the public know that the high-quality cherry was supplied through various sales courses and contributed to the development of both wholesale market circulation and agri-tourism.

4. Conclusion

Farmers take an important role as actor forming rural landscape. As farmers engage in rural tourism as one "commodity" for an image of rural area, consensus building of tourism farms and non-tourism farms of the same area is important to create rural space as object of the consumption. Consequently, the formation of an opportunity and the place in deference to each farm management strategy become the important point at issue about a problem of "commodity of rural space".

Keywords: Agri-tourism, Cherry-growing Area, Sustainable System, Succession and Sharing of Cultivation Technique, Sagae City, Yamagata Prefecture