

Mini Geotourism Centered on Itoigawa's Old Town

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One of the main points of entry for the Itoigawa Geopark is Itoigawa Station, located in the middle of Itoigawa's Old Town. The north side of the station has since long ago been a shopping area. Once lively with activity, it now sees little foot traffic. This problem is shared with many rural cities, the causes include: loss of customers to large suburban box stores, the recent trend away from public transport, and declined enthusiasm among shop owners due to decreased sales and difficulty in finding successors. In 2009 came Global Geopark certification and plans were undertaken to further utilize and revitalize the Old Town in time for the new Hokuriku Shinkansen Line in March 2015. In this session, we will introduce how we are using Geotourism in order to increase foot traffic in the Old Town. The center of the old town district is an area called 'Ro-no-Ji' for its square shape resembling the Japanese character 'ro'. It is largely commercial and is often used for events such as festivals. Itoigawa Station lies at one corner of Ro-no-Ji alongside a tourism information center which includes geopark information. In the Old Town are a statue of Princess Nunakawa, a local deity; and historical landmarks including the beginning of the old Salt Trail, Kaga-no-I Brewery, and a gangi-lined street. Gangi are traditional roofs built over streets Japan's snowy regions. This street preserves the image of Japan before modern shopping malls. A number of Geopark-related sights show ways in which the land has changed. These are all valuable tools in the development of the Old Town District. The Itoigawa Machinaka Collection is an event that has been held every year since 2006. Participation is increasing yearly and in 2013 a Town Walking Tour attracted many participants looking to enjoy the Old Town. The 'Increase Shop Charms Women's Club' was formed in 2010 by 50 women working in the Old Town to help revitalize the area in preparation for the new Shinkansen. They now help with the Machinaka Collection, sell limited edition sweets, and participate in events in the area, helping to reenergize the district. The Itoigawa Geopark Council promotes downtown walking through pedestrian maps. These maps include interesting sights around the station as well as specialty products available at downtown shops. The leaflet targeted toward women has been particularly well-received. Itoigawa Station is a hub which connects the Hokuriku Main Line with the Oito Line, and so travelers occasionally must wait for their connection. Wanting to capitalize on this, a Geopark Guide Walking Tour program was tested. Over 10 days in late October, 8 people participated in these impromptu tours. All 8 were women who, having time to spend before their next train, enquired at the tourism desk about things to do. The guides primarily focused on the gangi street, Kaga-no-I Brewery, the seaside viewing platform, and downtown shops, from which some visitors bought gifts. Others declined the tour, but took leaflets to walk the town alone. To improve secondary transport from Itoigawa Station, a Town Loop Bus began operation in 2011. Running weekends and holidays, the bus starts at the station and makes a 40 min. loop through central Itoigawa's main tourist sites. Among these are the Fossa Magna Museum, Chojagahara Archaeological Museum, and the Itoigawa Folk History Museum. These are all indispensable facilities within the Geopark and the new bus line is important for visiting Geotourists. Since starting an all-day pass program in 2013, ridership has increased. The Old Town has many sites of interest, but they are being overlooked. Few people visit the Old Town outside of events. In order to help people understand the charms of this area, we must improve information transmission and hospitality. We mustn't miss the opportunity afforded to us by the opening of the new Hokuriku Shinkansen to increase visitors to this forgotten gem.

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