

# Sport Tourism in Japan: Present & Future Perspectives

By Munehiko Harada



Author  
Munehiko Harada

## What is Sport Tourism?

Sport tourism is “an effort to build a mechanism for people to migrate through sports”, and it aims to construct a tourism system with sport being its main attraction. However, up until very recently, sport and tourism had been treated as very separate and distinct concepts in Japan. While the importance of sport had been recognized in physical education at schools and social physical education, sports events and sports facilities had never been treated as “tourism resources”, and general awareness towards sport tourism had been very low.

Japan has traditionally enjoyed leisure activities which involve human migration and lodging, such as skiing, climbing, swimming in the ocean, and hiking. But these were generally perceived to be a small domestic leisure market which only Japanese people enjoyed, and never really achieved the level of being sport tourism. In Europe and the United States, sport tourism has been perceived as being resilient against recession, and has been highlighted as the fast-growing domain of tourism, and as such, sport tourism has been aggressively used as a marketing tool for cities and local communities. When human migration in the sports domain, such as participating in sporting activities, watching games, supporting sporting events through volunteer work, or visiting sports facilities or sports museums, is taken into account and analyzed through the lens of tourism, it is evident that there lies a vast market potential for revitalization of cities and local communities across Japan.

## Belated Arrival of New Tourism

It was in 2002 that tourism began to be viewed as an important industry to revitalize the Japanese economy. In the “Basic Policies for Economic and Fiscal Policy Management and Structural Reform” which was agreed in 2002, six economic revitalization strategies were proposed. Included in the policies were an item to revitalize the tourism industry and an item for Japanese working people to take longer vacations. This led to the creation of the Asia Gateway Concept (2007), the Basic Act on Promotion of a Tourism Nation (2007), and the establishment of the Tourism Agency (2008). Lagging 20 years behind Europe and the US, tourism finally began to be acknowledged as a modern industry in Japan. This comes with a paradigm shift in Japan’s domestic policies where the Japanese economy has chosen to take a new path in nurturing a new value creation industry, while at the same time maintaining the emphasis

on the fundamental industry of Japan, the manufacturing industry.

Since 2008, the Tourism Agency has been developing a “New Tourism Creation and Distribution Promotion Project” to create New Tourism related products. New Tourism is a new concept in tourism for Japan, and it includes industrial tourism, eco-tourism, green tourism, health tourism, long-term stays and cultural tourism. However, sport tourism is still not included in the definition of New Tourism, and thus never received attention as an independent tourism domain.

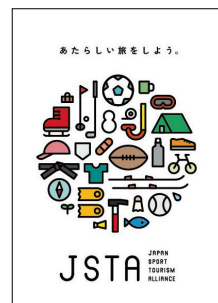
Things began to take a turn in 2010, when the Promotion of a Tourism Nation Headquarters Working Group proposed the concept of sports tourism, and subsequently in June of that year the Sports Tourism Promotion Conference was set up. With this, sport tourism belatedly came to be recognized as a New Tourism. In June 2011 the “Basic Act on Promotion of Sport Tourism” was formulated, and since then projects such as appointing tourism “Masters”, domestic sport monitoring tours, and human resource development and training targeted for sport tourism have been undertaken.

Moreover, with Japan now set to host the 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games in Tokyo, general interest in sport has increased in Japan, and as a secondary effect of that all Japanese local municipalities have actively begun working towards inviting and hosting training camps to be held ahead of the Games. This has also added momentum to the promotion of sport tourism, and also to the establishment of Regional Sports Commissions.

## Establishment of Japan Sport Tourism Alliance & Project Contents

The “Japan Sport Tourism Alliance” (JSTA) was established in April 2012 to promote sport tourism as stipulated in the “Basic Principles to Promote Sport Tourism”. The JSTA is the first public interest corporation to spin off from the Tourism Agency, and the following nine projects are stipulated in its Articles of Association.

- ① To build a national network of regions, communities and others engaging in sport tourism
- ② To support the building of regional platforms for sport tourism
- ③ To cooperate, support, and propose inviting and hosting



Logo for Japan Sport Tourism Alliance (JSTA)

international sport competition games

- ④ To support promotion and creation of travel related products which utilize sport
- ⑤ To improve the sports environment, and to make proposals on how sports activities can be more easily accessed at travel destinations
- ⑥ To develop sport tourism-related human resources and host training events in collaboration with universities and other institutions
- ⑦ To assemble information on sport in Japan, to disseminate the information both domestically and internationally, and to host lectures and events
- ⑧ To research the promotion of sport tourism, various awards and honors, and to support related events
- ⑨ To exchange information with overseas sport tourism organizations, and to undertake overseas inspection missions, etc.

The JSTA is currently in its third year of operations, and for this year the following three projects serve as the pillars for raising awareness of sport tourism.

- JSTA Seminar series (monthly seminars for members)
- JSTA Conference series (half-day annual national conference to be held in Tokyo once a year)
- JSTA Congress (overnight annual national conference to be held in local cities once a year)

In addition to these core projects, in 2014 a “Seminar Planning Commission” which organizes seminars, and the “2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games Committee”, which collects and disseminates information on sports competitions in Japan and also invites athletic camps to Japan, were established. A “Human Resource Development Section” was also established by the JSTA to discuss sport tourism human resource development.

As of September 2014, the JSTA has as members 31 corporations, 19 public interest corporations, 15 sport associations, 27 local governments, and 95 individuals. The JSTA plans to explore and expand stakeholder marketing strategies which emphasize the importance of business-to-business relationships, and hopes to empower its business match-making functions by connecting the member organizations. Most recently, the “2014 Le Tour de France Saitama Criterium” was successfully hosted by the Saitama Sports Commission, a JSTA public interest corporation member, receiving sponsorship from All Nippon Airways (ANA) by way of ANA being its official airline for the event, and success is beginning to be noticed. The JSTA intends to further expand opportunities for its members to connect. For example, a sports equipment manufacturer and a hotel, or national federations of various sports competitions in Japan, the hosting rights owners of sports events, and local municipalities can connect with each other so that the individual needs of the member organizations are met and complemented. This is considered to be a valuable service to JSTA members.

Photo: JSTA



*The author with Rick Traer, CEO of Canadian Sport Tourism Alliance (CAST), at the JSTA Congress (Osaka) in January 2014*

## Sport as a Tourism Resource

In an Interim Report to the Sport Tourism Promotion Conference of the Tourism Agency in July 2010, I noted that in Japan there are sports such as professional baseball, J-League soccer, rugby, professional golf, sumo, and judo which are regarded as “sports to watch”, and other sports such as skiing, climbing, and swimming in the ocean which utilize the diverse natural environment and are regarded as “sports to play” and that Japanese people enjoy in their everyday lives. Moreover, there are individual volunteers and organizations that support these activities and sport competitions. Generally speaking, Japan is one of Asia’s most advanced sporting nations, and the environment surrounding sport in Japan gives it a competitive international advantage.

As stated in the report, if one looks at sport from a sport tourism perspective, the amount of resources in Japan is astounding and full of potential. Japan is a country with many mountainous areas, but with the exception of climbing and skiing there has not been any major or outstanding growth in outdoor recreational sports. However, the variance in altitudes across Japan, which was once considered a hindrance, is now revealed to be a treasure box filled with outdoor sport potential, as the [Chart](#) suggests. Sports that have become popular in recent years, such as river rafting, hill climbing, and bicycle racing can all be pursued in mountainous areas, and events in these sports can take place in many of the regions and communities across Japan.

However, due to poor destination management in Japan, these tourism resources have long been abandoned as “hidden assets” and are presently under-utilized. Destination management is an activity to establish the comparative advantages of a travel destination in a particular region (or city) by strategically branding tourism resources, such as historical and cultural monuments, local specialty products, events, and scenery. The number of foreign tourists who visited Japan in 2013 exceeded 10 million, and Japan expects more foreign visitors to come. Possible travel destinations in Japan stretch from the coral reefs in the south to the powder snow in the north,

CHART

## Outdoor sports as a sport tourism resource utilizing different altitudes



Source: Author

and great potential lies in the vast outdoor resources. For example, the distance between the most northern part of Japan, Soya Cape in Hokkaido, and the most southern part, Hateruma Island, is roughly equivalent in latitude to the stretch from Seattle on the West Coast of the US to Key West in the southern state of Florida. This means that Japan possesses an environment like no other Asian nation, where winter sports and tropical sports can both be enjoyed simultaneously.

In particular, an increasing number of foreign tourists are visiting Hokkaido, home to a wealth of outdoor sports activities throughout the year. The total number of nights that foreign tourists have stayed in Hokkaido increased from 1.65 million in 2011 to 2.5 million in 2012. Breaking down these statistics, the number of tourists from Thailand increased 3.5 times and the number from Australia increased 1.9 times, showing Hokkaido to be a popular destination for foreign tourists. Those with wealth in Southeast Asia show interest in Hokkaido because of the quality of the snow, the cool and cold weather, and the beautiful scenery, and because their interest in outdoor sports is equally high. Australian tourists have identified tour interests in Hokkaido throughout the year, and municipalities like Niseko have constructed various on-site outdoor sports facilities and sport-related products. With these various efforts to attract tourists across Hokkaido by municipalities, the number of foreign tourists visiting Hokkaido is steadily rising.

### Potential for Increase in Sport Tourists

If Asia, a prospective inbound market for sport tourism, continues to maintain its economic growth, the combined population of the middle-income and high-income class is forecasted to double to

1.95 billion by 2020 ("Low Income Groups Driving Asian 'Domestic Demand'" by Noriyuki Yanagawa and Naoko Mori, *NIRA Monograph Series*, No. 31, National Institute for Research Advancement, June 2010). This number far exceeds the sum of the combined population of developed countries, including those in Europe and the US.

To meet the increasing demand for overseas travel from Asia to Japan, Japan has eased its visa policies according to where the visitors are from, and this should be a positive system reform to further boost the number of tourists visiting Japan. For example, visa issue conditions for middle-income private Chinese individuals have been relaxed since July 2010, and this has resulted in a huge increase in the number of Chinese tourists visiting Japan. In 2012, multiple short-term entry visas for a period of 15 days and maximum of 90 days (valid for three years) were introduced for visitors from Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia, and this paved the way for the subsequent introduction of short-term entry visas for visitors from Vietnam and the Philippines.

The extension of the stay period with multiple-entry visas for visitors from Indonesia was then extended to 30 days. In 2013, multiple short-term stay entry visas were extended to include visitors from Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia, and as a result visitors from these six nations increased from 775,000 in June 2012 to 1.1 million in 2013, contributing to the total number of foreign visitors exceeding 10 million for the first time in Japanese history.

Like Japanese tourists many years ago who began visiting foreign destinations, many of the Asian tourists currently visiting Japan for the first time come on package holidays in tour groups visiting famous and historical locations. Many Asian tourists are interested in shopping, hot springs, and Japanese food. Unlike European or American tourists, they are less interested in traditional Japanese culture and historical monuments, which are similar to their own. It is expected that foreign tourists who have completed a first round of touring around Japan will now shift towards "Special Interest Tourism" which emphasizes the exchange and experience aspects of travel, with specific travel themes such as eco-tourism, medical tourism, and sport tourism.

### Sport Tourism-Related Product Development

Tourism is essentially the act of comparing the information one has collected about a particular pre-determined destination with the actual experience of the trip itself, an act to confirm a "pre-established harmony". It also possesses the characteristic of "recurrence" where one migrates from the place of departure to the tour destination, and then returns to the place of departure. Thus, sport tourism-related product development will require consideration of regional and local resources and must have a strategic perspective





Photo: JSTA

JSTA display booth (with Japan Sport Council) at Sports Accord held in Antalya, Turkey, in April 2014



Photo: Japan Tourism Agency

A popular optional tour at Nozawa Onsen Skinow Resort

on destination management. At the same time, the product needs to offer experience-value that exceeds the expectations of pre-established harmony. When the experience of participating in a sports event or watching sports is spectacular and far exceeds the pre-established harmony, that tourist becomes a repeat tourist who gains attachment to a particular region or community.

The process for product development around sport tourism is no different from that of other product development or service development processes. There is a need for environmental analysis of local resources (natural environment and sports facilities) and management resources (human resources and financial resources), and for marketing strategies such as decision making on the targeted market segment and the identification of competitors. In addition, there is also the need for an entire product development process which includes 1) getting relevant ideas, 2) screening, 3) formulating the product identity, 4) testing feasibility through experiment and obtaining proof, and 5) implementation.

## Founding Sports Commissions

In cooperation with the Tourism Agency, the JSTA, as the implementing organization of sport tourism, supports the establishment of "Regional Sports Commissions" which act as a one-stop service-providing organization, to support inviting and hosting sports camps and events across Japan. The "Saitama Sports Commission" which was established in the fall of 2011 succeeded in inviting and hosting the "2014 Le Tour de France Saitama Criterium". The "Sports Commission Kansai" has also succeeded in inviting the "2021 World Masters Games", and Japan has seen many such successes in inviting international sporting events to Japan. In addition, the "Saga Prefecture Sports Commission" and the "Niigata City Culture and Sports Commission" were established in 2013, and the "Sports Commission Okinawa", "Gifu Prefecture Sports Commission" and "Sports Commission Aichi" are also expected to be established.

## Conclusion

In Japan, the birth rate is declining and the ageing of society is progressing, and in such a nation it is impossible to reboot the past high economic growth model. Therefore Japan, which is shifting from a mature economy to a gradually declining economy, requires a new Public Management Model. One such initiative is the "visualization" of Japan's hidden assets, and the "merchandising" of these assets through business-minded thinking and creativity.

As Tatsura Uchida has said ("Grand Public Lectures", *AERA*, 2011), "Japan needs to abandon policies with economic growth as the underlying condition, and use its limited but precious 'hidden assets' (e.g. rich natural environment, culture, safety, social equality, cooperation among local communities and system of mutual help, and traditions of manufacturing and craftsmanship) and shift towards 'collaboration platform-based social models'." Japan indeed has many hidden assets that are highly competitive in the global market. The epitome of these assets is the "creation of value" industry, which was hidden behind the manufacturing industry and therefore lagged behind in its industrialization process. Tourism is one such industry with the most potential to grow.

As mentioned, Japan is home to one of the richest natural resources in the world and is also perceived as relatively safe and secure, and depending on the destination management it is possible to further increase the number of foreign tourists coming to Japan. Sport tourism, which is called the belated New Tourism, should attract further attention now that Japan will be hosting the 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games in Tokyo, and sport tourism is set to become the most promising segment of Japan's "creation of value" industry.

**JS**

Munehiko Harada is a professor at Tokyo's Waseda University, and previously professor at Osaka University of Health and Sport Sciences. He gained his doctorate at Pennsylvania State University.