

Towards Inclusive Leadership in Japan's National Parks: Investigating the Potential of a 'Park Partners' Program to Improve Diversity

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Summary of Research

With a renewed policy-focus on 'inbounds' since 1996 (Soshiroda, 2005), the number of international arrivals to Japan increased from 3.8 million (2003) to 8.3 million (2008), then 13.4 million (2014) and 23 million in 2018 in line with the national policy to promote inbound tourism in the run-up to the 2020 Olympics. This rapid increase has encouraged visitors to diversify geographically away from the urban hubs to visit remote rural regions, including popular national parks such as Fuji-Hakone-Izu (Kanto) and Aso-Kuju (Kyushu). However the sudden influx and diversity of the new visitors is posing significant challenges for park management. Visitor demographics have been homogenous and few of the rangers are ready to deal with a new era of international tourists. The profile of staff and site managers is highly homogenous in favour of middle-aged/elderly Japanese males without much experience travelling abroad or speaking foreign languages. This lack of diversity, specifically few female and no foreign rangers, is prevalent amongst permanent MoE rangers (shizen hogokan). It undermines their ability to implement meaningful management interventions viz-a-viz the increasingly heterogeneous spectrum of inbound visitors.

In order to tackle the three main research questions, this study contains both qualitative and quantitative research methods. The qualitative component derives from data collected from pilot interviews (September 2019) and focus groups conducted at the 2 national parks in 2020 February-March. The quantitative component derives from data collected through a survey of ranger offices Japan to investigate rangers profile and create an inventory of issues related to inbounds. The 3 Research Questions are:-

RQ1: What is the current state of inclusive leadership among MoE rangers in national parks?

RQ2: What are the challenges that inbound visitors pose to MoE rangers' preparation and skill-sets?

RQ3: How could more diversity among rangers / site managers tackle the aforementioned challenges?

The broadening number and range of inbound tourists' nationalities symbolizes the internationalization of the national parks. In response, there is an urgent need to set-up and nurture

inclusive management environments that can support diversity in natural resource stewardship. In the role of field leaders and site managers, rangers require the requisite knowledge and understanding in assessing the needs of 'inbound' segments, monitoring not only quantitative visitation and spatial flow patterns but also gaining qualitative insights into international visitor behavior in order to provide various services.