

Towards Rural Community-based Sustainable Tourism: A Case Study of Shiraho, Ishigaki Island, Okinawa, Japan

Zheng GAO

Key Words: Sustainable tourism, Sustainable community development, SWOT analysis, Strategic planning

1. Research background and objectives

Shiraho is a village located in the eastern coastal area of Ishigaki Island, Okinawa Prefecture, Japan. In the adjacent waters is the largest blue coral community in the Northern Hemisphere. The international NGO Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) has been conducting coral reef conservation in Shiraho since the late 1980s. In 2000, WWF Japan established the Coral Reef Conservation and Research Centre in Shiraho to lead local environmental conservation and sustainable development. With WWF Japan's direction and support, the local community has established its own organisation, NPO Natsupana, to take over local leadership for environmental conservation and sustainable community development in Shiraho. NPO Natsupana developed sustainable group tours that have been conducted five times to date, but the project faces financial, promotion and marketing shortcomings.

This research examines the feasibility and potential of sustainable tourism development in Shiraho through an analysis of the outcomes of the past five tours. On the basis of the analysis, this research proposes a number of strategies for improvement and development, and ranks their projected feasibility.

2. Research methodology

This research comprises three stages. The purpose of the first stage was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the organisations and activities related to sustainability in Shiraho based on a literature review and participant observation. In the second stage, questionnaire surveys, interviews and focus group discussions were used to collect data. The third stage was assessment and analysis using the Strength-Weakness-Opportunity-Threat (SWOT) approach. With this method, important factors for sustainable tourism development in Shiraho were identified and possible strategies were presented. Finally, a quantitative strategic planning matrix (QSPM) was applied to these strategies, in order to rank them according to feasibility.

3. Main research results

Through this research, the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of Shiraho for sustainable tourism development were illuminated. The precious coral reef resources and traditional culture were found to be its biggest strengths, while finance, promotion and labour shortcomings were detected as its biggest weakness. The top two opportunities for Shiraho were that Ishigaki Island is a hot spot for tourism, and that Shiraho has gained much attention and support from WWF Japan. Meanwhile, Shiraho is also facing many threats, mainly fierce competition with other tourism spots on Ishigaki Island.

After SWOT analysis and QSPM, 21 strategies were developed and presented in order of feasibility. The top strategy is to involve more media in covering and promoting the tour activities. The next most recommended strategy is for Natsupana to apply for financial support from governments in order to improve its financial standing. The third best strategy is for governments to more actively promote Shiraho as an attractive tourist spot. The fourth best strategy is for information about sustainable community development to be integrated into all the tour activities.