

Chapter 6

The Viewpoint of a Foreigner Living in Tohoku II

Tohoku and Tourism : Problems, Potential, Projects

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1. Introduction

I have had a long-lasting relationship with Japan since my university years. For some unknown reasons, our connection is so strong that I didn't hesitate to move to Tono, Iwate, when an attractive job opportunity came up in October 2016. It is a job related to regional "revitalization" and, as "social transition designer" as I have been called, I thought that living in the battlefield would have made a lot of sense, if I really wanted to try and implement my theories on social innovation.

In Japan's countryside a Western looking foreigner is something in between an object of worship and an animal on the verge of extinction but, above all, he/she is, without any possible doubt, either an English teacher or an expert on inbound tourism (sigh)!

Unfortunately for my fellow citizens, I am neither of the two. Yet, given the insistence with which I have been repeatedly asked to say something on "tourism", I did finally capitulated and started to express my experience-based opinion on the "T" word! (I will not teach English, though, no matter how insistent anyone could possibly become!) Following is my contribution to the making of this book on "*agriturismo*" in Tohoku.

2. Tohoku and Tourism : Problems and Potential

For the past five years, I have travelled extensively around Tohoku, mainly around the area affected by the tsunami of 2011. The first time I rode along the coast from Oofunato (Iwate) to Kesennuma (Miyagi), I was stricken by the beauty of its untouched coastal area. The sea - the same sea that had taken away the lives of many thousands of people just a few months earlier - surprised me for being so powerful yet inspiring, with its scattered small islands and harsh cliffs. I was also surprised by how little exploited such a beautiful landscape had remained so far. The comparison to touristic spots in the Mediterranean, like Amalfi or the Costa Brava, came up automatically in my Italian-set mind.

Obviously, not many foreign travelers had reached the Sanriku coast and given it the international fame as a tourist attraction as it had been the more or less fortunate case - depending on the point of view - for equally nowadays famous spots in Europe. At that time I thought that, if properly promoted at the grassroots level and in a responsible way, with local entrepreneurs acting as the engines of touristic flows, that coast could have become a long lasting source of wealth and job opportunities for local communities, in the respect of the environment.

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In fact, after the tsunami, there had been hopes for a shift to tourism from heavy fishery and industry, as an alternative source of income. Unfortunately, the central government decision of raising ten or more meters high anti-tsunami, concrete “protection barriers” right in front of the sea, washed away these hopes in the majority of cases.

Nevertheless, there are interesting success stories, such as the case of the rural and marine life education Centre Moriumius, (<http://moriumius.jp/en/>) in the town of Ogatsu, Miyagi. The Morumius’s case shows how local empowerment, with the collaboration of external players, can overcome obstacles and lead to new possibilities for a not- exploitative kind of tourism in Tohoku.

To outline the problems but also the potential of Tohoku’s inland, I will describe now the situation of tourism and agritourism in Tono, the town where I currently live and work, as I believe it offers a good example for other places in the region.

3. Tono : An Example

Tono is a lively town of about twenty-eight thousand inhabitants, located one and a half hours away from the Iwate Prefecture’s capital city of Morioka, in a fertile valley of paddy rice fields, crossed by clear water streams and rivers and surrounded by softly sloped green (or reddish or white, depending on the season!) mountains. The town, which for centuries had been a bursting center of trade between the coast and the hinterland, has a rich history and it is usually referred to as the cradle of Japanese folklore.

Numerous legends, that narrate the harshness of traditional rural life, had been passed by word of mouth, from generation to generation, until in 1910 they were given literary fame by the renowned ethnologist Kunio Yanagita, who collected them in a book titled *Tono Monogatari* (*Legends of Tono*).

In the early 1990s, the local government started to use some aspects of the Legends as a simplistic tool for attracting tourists to the city, along with a number of expensive (and I would also add, short-sighted) initiatives that temporarily boosted the number of visitors, but that proved unsustainable in the long term. The lack of flexibility in the use of those facilities, as well as of an update to the experiences they offer, have prevented them from adapting to the needs of more sophisticated, twenty first century travelers. The majority of foreign travelers to Tono have been Western adventurers, looking for “real” Japan. Unable to appeal any longer to them, the government is now targeting less experienced Asian tourists, but with little success, so far.

In the view of Prof Harold Goodwin, recognized expert of Responsible Tourism, who visited us in Tono in February 2017, the main problem with maintaining the interest of potential tourists in visiting sites such as “Furusato Village” or Denshoen Park (made up villages spotted with traditional *magariya* houses), was the hollowness of the sites. The sites, created 30 years ago with the intention of “preserving” and showing traditional Japanese rural life, nowadays are perceived by more demanding tourists, as nothing more than open air history museums, void of any flavor, not to say any real life.

So what is that can “attract” (foreign and national) tourists of the twenty first century to a town like Tono? In my view, it is living in direct contact with local people, along the opportunity of enjoying the beauty of its seasonally changing landscape and its unique culture, but also its innovative projects, what makes it worth travelling four hours up north east of Tokyo and visit the city at least for a few days.

In an increasingly globalized and “metropolized” world (Japan’s urban population in 2016 was reported at 93.93 %, according to the World Bank), even a temporary feel of rural life has become a scarce and precious experience for the vast majority of people, born and raised in an urban environment. An experience they long for. Giving this people “reality” will make them wanting to visit the place even more.

An important contribution to the understanding of Tono’s (=Japanese) rural lifestyle is offered by the Tono Rural Life Network (Yamasatonetto), an NPO established in 2003: “to revitalize the area through Green Tourism.”

(http://www.tonotv.com/members/yamasatonet/en/about_us.html.)

Those of you who, more than legitimately, are wondering what “Green tourism” means, please be informed that it is a fully Japanese-made up expression, broadly corresponding to British “rural” tourism and Italian “agritourism”, the main difference being that Japanese “Green tourism” has become synonymous with a cheap and possibly not so clean homestay in a farm, coupled with hard work in the fields. As a consequence, generally speaking Green Tourism targets primary to secondary school children, which have nouthter opportunity to get in contact with the countryside.

Yamasatonetto was among the pioneer institutions to import the European concept of rural tourism to Japan, in order to introduce urban dwellers to the rural world they are increasingly disconnected from. In its 15 years of activities, Yamasatonetto has been able to involve a large number of local farmers in their project. Currently there are about 150 hosting farms in Tono, providing quite different services, from hard and basic rural experience to more sophisticated ones.

Yamasatonetto has attempted at changing the negative image around Green Tourism by providing rural life experiences also to “normal” adults, by coupling, for example, the farm- stay experience with getting a driving license. For two weeks, while learning how to drive in a local driving school, every year’s hundreds of youngsters from metropolitan areas, live in local inns and farms, while learning how to drive in a rather safe environment. This mid-term stay helps building up personal relations with the hosts and the new drivers remain connected with Tono for years to come.

More recently, Yamasatonetto has started collaborating with Miraizukuri College (a Tono- based organization sponsored by Fuji Xerox), to provide accommodation and rural life experiences to employees of big corporations attending the College’s Human Resources and Team Building programs. Also, with the Summer Campus Program, they work with national and international University students. These are no doubts good ideas to improve the perception of rural tourism and to establish good long term connections between metropolitan and countryside dwellers.

One more recent initiative is: “to know, knowing Tono, knowing hidden Japan”. As mentioned above, since the 1990s “Legends of Tono” has been used by local authorities, as a trivial tool to attract tourists to Tono. Yet Tono citizens themselves are not very familiar with the book and see it either as a piece of literature for specialists or as the collection of stories transformed into cute mascots such as the “kappa”.

Nonetheless, beyond the hard to grasp surface, Tono’s legends hide an incredibly rich history and manifolds meanings that anyone interested in Japan would find enchanting.

to know (*too-nou*), is a multifaceted project that aims at empowering Tono's citizens through a series of periodical study sessions and field works, led by local knowledgeable, passionate experts of the *Legends of Tono*. The educational process is a first essential step to transform participating citizens from passive receivers of a top-down instigated tourism, to promoters of a community based style of tourism, whose ultimate benefits stay in the community.

On the one hand, by connecting history and folklore, education and tourism, *to know* wishes to "awaken" local players, making them rediscover their own roots, understand the uniqueness of their cultural heritage, and by doing so, stimulate the use of those available resources for new touristic business projects or the improvement of existing ones. Staying in any of the local inns, eat locally grown products, cooked according to traditional recipes, listening, from the live voice of farmers, to traditional folktales still alive in the daily lives of Tono's inhabitants, is part of the project and some inn owners are already taking part in it.

On the other hand, *to know* attempts at acting as a kind of filter, by appealing to a rather defined typology of visitor, whether Japanese or foreign. The objective is to increase the numbers of repeaters and their length of stay, instead of the total number of visitors to the city, and to focus on those travelers that have a deep interest in history, folklore, art and gastronomy.

To level up the profile of visitors, *to know* is planning an original short stay program for national and international artists and designers. Artists, shortly living with local inn owners, learning about life style and folktales, will help "upgrade" and update the contents of the *Legends of Tono*, brushing up existing cultural resources, which have a great potential but limited local awareness and therefore visibility.

4. Conclusions

From what I have described in this article, Tono may appear as a special reality. Yet I believe that Japan has plenty of similarly resources-rich towns and villages, with their own green mountains, rice fields, legends or traditional housing.

What I would like to stress, is that the preexistence of a fertile terrain, open-mindedness of local partners and the presence of external eyes, able to see the "extraordinary" beyond the "normality", is the right combination to make flourish Tohoku's hidden beauty and make it appeal to those who can really appreciate it. The process of "awakening" of local sleeping resources, local empowerment, new ideas and the shift from a consumerist oriented kind of tourism to a community-based type of tourism are all fundamental ingredients to make of Tohoku a top class destination for Japan's lovers.

Pictures related to the contents of this paper are as follows.

Picture 1. Author Self-Portrait



(Source: Photographed by author)

Picture 2. Landscape in Private House of Tono



(Source: Photographed by author)

Picture 3. Landscape in Private House of Tono



(Source: Photographed by author)

Picture 4. Scenery of Private House Appearance in Tono



(Source: Photographed by author)

Picture 5. Study Meeting Scene of Next Commons Corporation



(Source: Photographed by author)

Picture 6. Scenery of Private House Appearance in Tono



(Source: Photographed by author)