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Placing Tourism among the Options for Small Forest Owners in Northern Japan ¹

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All too often, a small, private forest property fails to meet its potential for the owner or for the community. This is particularly true of depopulating rural areas in industrialized countries where community demographics are changing most. Some attention has recently been given to rural tourism as an option to assist Asian farmers in these circumstances, but what of its potential to assist small-scale forestry producers? This paper examines a population of small forest property owners in Hokkaido Prefecture, Japan. The paper assesses the receptiveness of this community of forest owners to the idea of tourism in their forests. Using original survey data, the paper illustrates that private forest owners' openness to tourism is strongly related to their interpretation of 'forest' in metaphorical terms. The paper concludes by suggesting the best way to pursue the development of 'forest tourism' in this community is to rely on the forest owners cooperative to re-package the concept as a 'secondary forest use', more closely reflecting forest owners' interpretations of the forest resource.

INTRODUCTION

A community where both population and industry are in decline is ripe for administrative intervention. Rural communities in Japan have seen interventions come in forms such as infrastructure developments, tax incentives and 'hometown' movements. Anthropological and sociological studies of such situations show that even where the intervention is deemed by officials to be successful, the levels of success are not evenly spread-out or experienced within a community, ultimately due to differences in rights to access the 'fruits' of that intervention (see Wiber 1990, Bartlett 1993, Knight 1996). In particular, Knight (1996) showed the diversity of interests and their various levels of involvement with economic developments brought on through hot-spring tourism in rural Japan. In Knight's example, the workings of Japan's 'hometown' (*furusato*) movement as an option for revitalizing rural communities following forestry's decline are clearly shown to draw primarily on the local farm and hot-spring attractions rather than the forest resources. In

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Knight's model, tourism is an intervention that replaces the forests as well as the forestry industry in an effort to halt the trend of depopulation and stimulate economic growth in these communities.

Studies of tourism, much like the Japanese 'hometown' tourism movement itself, have largely overlooked forestry and private forest owners as participants in any discussion on potential tourism initiatives.² Should the application arise, would forest owners represent one more classification of 'resident,' to benefit (more, or less) from tourism (as in Krippendorf 1987, Brunt and Courtney 1999), or would they appear fractured in their support for this intervention as seen in anthropological studies of other interventions? If the effectiveness of any potential tourism initiative is to be understood or predicted then more must be known about the choices being made by forest owners. What are the factors that influence the choices which forest owners make relative to the maintenance of their properties? What is the role of the forest owner organizations in influencing these choices and can they be expected to include tourism in their recommendations to members? Finally, and most critically, what is the potential openness of forest owners to a secondary, non-timber related use of their properties such as forest tourism? The answers to these questions will not be found in an economic study; rather, it requires an effort to understand the values which owners themselves place on their forest properties and how these and their institutional environment affect their use of the forest resource. In this way, the suitability of tourism to private forestry development can be seen from the owners' perspective in order to better predict the possible success or failure of any future tourism incentive program.

Andersson (1992) has written on the effects of language and metaphor in determining forest owners' management choices in Sweden and Canada. Particularly, Andersson points to the implications of different cultural associations with the word 'forest' in Swedish and English. In Swedish, the word for 'forest' (*skog*) evokes no distinction between a 'woodlot' (denoting human control) and a 'forest' (implying wilderness). A corollary to this distinction in metaphors associated with language is that forest owner ideals of 'forest' differ in the two environments Andersson studied. Where Andersson emphasized the need to be aware of the influence of culture on meaning when discussing such metaphorically laden words as 'forest,' this study asked forest owners to describe their forest through metaphor in the first instance. The culture of values which influence forest management choices (especially concerning tourism in private forests) are explored with the aid of these metaphors for 'forest.'

This paper presents findings from a survey of forest owners who are members of a forest cooperative in a rural community in Hokkaido Prefecture, northern Japan. Drawing on research in the field of resource management and anthropology, the paper describes the organizational environment of forest owners (the cooperative) along with characteristics of forest owners, in order to view more clearly forest owners as a community of various interests, or a forum of social interaction (in the tradition of Moore 1978 and Ostrom 1990). Since this study was intended to shed

² Where forestry has not been overlooked, it is presented on a larger scale than is applicable in this situation. For example, Mercer *et al.* (1995) made an assessment of forest tourism, including the potential costs and benefits, in a large rainforest conservation project in Madagascar. Adamowicz *et al.* (1996) also addressed non-timber uses of forests, including tourism in the Amazon.

light on forest owners living within one municipality, rather than on all of the residents of that municipality, it was necessary from a methodological perspective to reach forest owners through their only collective association, the local forest cooperative.

RESEARCH METHODS

A postal survey using a prepared questionnaire was carried out of the members of a forest owner cooperative, as well as unstructured interviews with three forestry researchers and three officials, over the summers of 1999 and 2000. The cooperative chosen for this study was selected for its proximity to the Prefecture's economic and administrative capital of Sapporo City (population 1.8 M) as a large potential source of forest-tourists, as well as its reputation among local forest researchers for an active membership. After obtaining the permission and cooperation of the cooperative staff, copies of a 26-question questionnaire were mailed to the first 300 members of the 379 members in an alphabetically-ordered mailing list, and 72 (24%) were completed and returned for analysis. The survey was designed to assess characteristics of both the forests and the forest owners, with particular attention paid to the relationship between owner and forest as described through the owner's use of analogy and metaphor. The first five survey questions sought personal information, the next seven related to the forest as a property, and questions 13 to 23 concerned the forest as a resource (including use and metaphor), while the final three questions dealt with the forest cooperative and member satisfaction.

THE RESEARCH AREA

Hobetsu-cho is a small town (population 3,964) located about 40 km inland from the Pacific Ocean, in the south-central area of Hokkaido Island, in northern Japan (Figure 1). Unlike the other main islands of Japan, Hokkaido has a short history of intensive settlement and development. Before the late eighteenth century, Hokkaido was known by the Japanese as a wild hinterland called Ezo, inhabited primarily by a non-Japanese, indigenous population. In an episode reminiscent of North and South American history, the indigenous population of Ainu people was then displaced by expansionist Japanese settlers beginning in the period of the Meiji Restoration (1868 to 1912). Reinforcing this persistent hinterland image in the minds of most Japanese, Hokkaido's population density is now the lowest in Japan at 72 per square kilometer. The low population density is also evident in the high rate of forest coverage; 70% of Hokkaido's total area of 83,451 square kilometers is forested. The national government owns over half of this forest area, approximately 15% by prefecture or local government, and the remainder by private owners.

Hobetsu is just over a two-hour drive from the principal city of Sapporo and attracts visitors with an Earth-Science Center (based on the discovery of a fossilized dinosaur skeleton in the area), a museum, park, campsite and small hot spring. In 2001, for example, the Hobetsu Tourism Office estimated that 140,580 people made the trip to Hobetsu to see these permanent attractions, and an additional 10,000

people came from other communities to visit Hobetsu's summer festival.³ However, it is agricultural produce that brings the greatest recognition and reward to Hobetsu. Many of the forest owners who were contacted in this research describe themselves foremost as farmers, and of those melon farmers were most widespread.

Hokkaido Prefecture - Japan

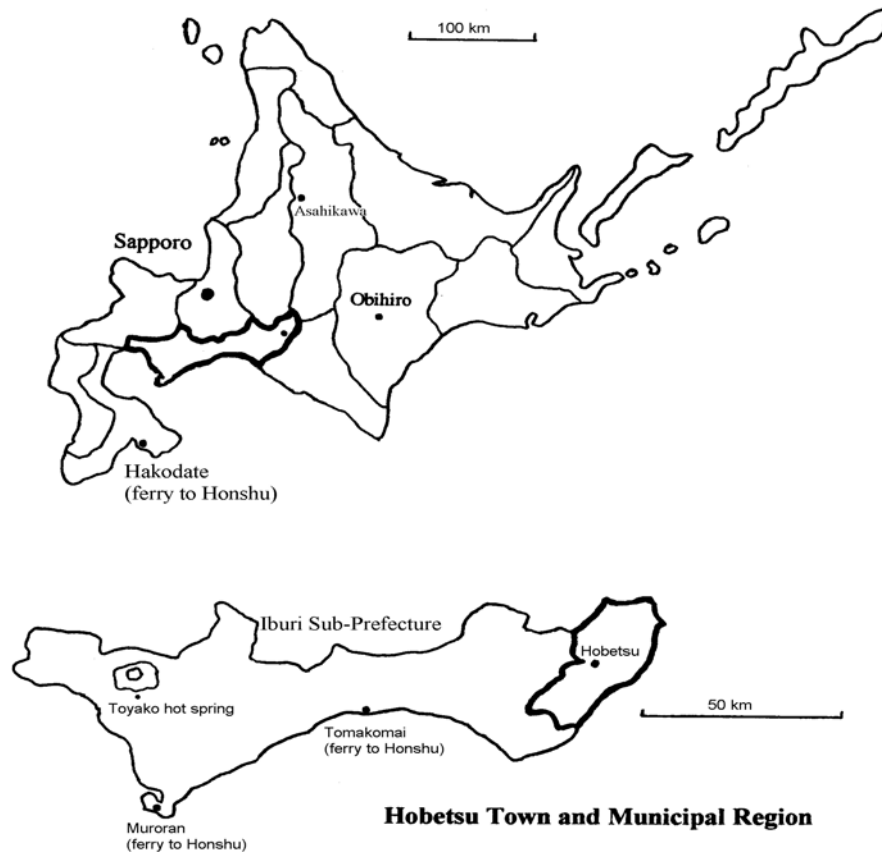


Figure 1. Location of the research area

ORGANIZATION OF FOREST OWNERS

The Hobetsu-cho Forest Owners Cooperative serves the forest owners who have property or reside within the 54,648 ha area of the Hobetsu municipal region.⁴ Joining the cooperative requires an initial payment of 30,000 yen and an annual cash

³ Source: Hobetsu Town Tourism Office records.

⁴ Hobetsu's cooperative is one of 1,089 forest owner cooperatives (*Shinrinkumiai*) in a nationwide network. For more information on the structure of forest owner and agricultural cooperatives, see Lönnstedt and Nilsagård (1999) and Mulgan (2000).

payment of 20 yen/ha. It is considered a small price to pay given the small or moderate size of most forest properties in the region (average 12 ha with a modal size between 1 and 5 ha).⁵ The advantages to forest owners in subsidy availability and information services make the cooperative's voluntary membership possible.

The stated main purpose of the Hobetsu cooperative is 'to help maintain the forest lands of cooperative members' (Takahashi 1999). When a forest owner joins the cooperative, a Forestry Technician from the cooperative inspects their forest property to determine what kinds of forestry treatments are necessary. A management plan may be formulated for the property (62% of the forest owners surveyed had chosen to formulate a management plan in this way). To carry out the treatments recommended in the management plan, forest owners must contract with a forest harvesting company, which in turn contracts with the cooperative. The cooperative itself conducts none of the treatments recommended and none of the marketing of members' products. Its primary function is to provide information services and to channel the government subsidies to forest owners to offset some of the costs of those services. Forest owners who reported they had harvested or had management plans, also indicated that they had received government subsidies through the cooperative. Lönnstedt and Nilsagård (1999) have suggested that this subsidy distribution function is the principal function of Japan's forest owner cooperatives. It must not be forgotten, however, that these subsidies are linked to the management treatments recommended by the cooperatives and are designed to encourage forest owners to follow the sustainable forestry guidelines set by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries.

In addition to the forest management planning and assessments, the cooperative publishes information pamphlets and provides a technical seminar for members every two or three years. Forest owners can learn about (or even receive materials for) starting or enhancing secondary uses of their forest properties. These information services account for the cooperative's popularity, with 88% of respondents reporting they were moderately or very satisfied with the cooperative (Table 1). In a recent initiative, the Hobetsu cooperative offered its members a maitake mushroom starter kit containing the information and materials needed to grow a beginner's crop of mushrooms on their land. This information service coupled with the funding incentives makes the cooperative the most ideally suited organization to introduce any new options for forest owners, whether that option is mushroom production or tourism.

Table 1. Satisfied with the cooperative?

Yes	No	Ambivalent	No opinion
30 (46%)	2 (3%)	28 (42%)	6 (9%)

⁵ Nationally, the modal size of private forest properties is less than 1 ha.

TOURISM AS AN OPTION FOR FOREST OWNERS

The many small family farms producing multiple crops characterize Japan's agricultural industry, and Hobetsu's forest owners are no exception. While 41% of those surveyed described their principal occupation as 'farmer,' they grow a diverse collection of crops, often including some combination of rice, melons, mountain vegetables, flowers or livestock (Table 2). An additional 24% of respondents listed themselves as 'retired' but many indicated they had been involved in some form of agriculture. Only two respondents chose 'forest producer' as their principal occupation even though 70% of the respondents intend to harvest in the future.

Table 2. Forest owners' occupations

Farming/ agriculture	Retired	Office worker	Housewife	Service industry	Forest producer
29 (41%)	17 (24%)	10 (14%)	8 (12%)	4 (6%)	2 (3%)

There are many reasons for a career as a forest producer to appear impractical in Japan (Ota 1997). Of 24 forest owners in Hobetsu who did not intend to harvest, the most commonly cited reasons were poor condition of their forest (54%), advanced age or poor health (25%), and poor condition of the economy (17%). Small amounts of wood are harvested for personal use (timber or firewood), but, even among those owners who intend to harvest commercially, greater importance is placed on their forests' ability to provide access to nature than on its ability to provide income from harvest.⁶

With so many forest properties included in predominantly agricultural enterprises, it should be no surprise that the forest is not identified as a primary source of income or base of occupation. The farm forest is generally a source of secondary products or a secondary product in itself. For example, many forest owners have expressed interest in the cooperative's maitake mushroom kits, or are already growing mushrooms or mountain vegetables in their forests. Mushrooms with commercial value such as shiitake and maitake are directly dependent on a forest environment and situated within the forest (unlike rice or melons), illustrating the forest's role in a secondary use. This would also appear to complicate any neat divisions between farm and forest. MacNaughton (1996) described secondary uses of private forests as a cause of increasingly divergent property rights and indicative of the complexity to be considered in the forest resource.

Hobetsu forest owners allow for secondary uses of their forest properties when that use is agricultural, as in the case of mushrooms, but do not consider tourism to be among these. Of five forest uses identified in the survey (timber, second product, personal, access to nature, and tourism) and ranked for importance, tourism was given the lowest rank.⁷ As one forest owner flatly reported, 'Tourists ruin forests!'

⁶ When asked to rate importance from 1 (not important) to 10 (very important), the income from harvests was given an average rate of 4.4 (mode of 3) while the access their forests provide to nature was given 6.8 on average (mode of 5).

⁷ Average 2.3 (mode of 1) on the scale of 1 (not important) to 10 (very important).

The reasons why tourism offends some residents in Hobetsu include increased visitor traffic, overcrowding and ‘trampling’ (to use another forest owner’s words) the attraction, in this case, the forest.⁸

The model described and endorsed by the Food and Fertilizer Technology Center (FFTC) for the Asian and Pacific region to assist farmers with relatively small plots throughout Asia, implies retail development of small farms (FFTC 1998). Farmers are advised to establish facilities for tourists from nearby cities provided they grow crops that can be easily harvested by visitors, or have local food products for sale. Komaki (1999) identified a different model of tourism in the forests of Japan where many city residents express a desire to visit forested properties and assist with weeding, pruning, thinning and other such forestry work. An example of this trend can be seen on a forested property near the city of Tomakomai, about 50km west of Hobetsu. Groups of volunteers from Sapporo City regularly visit a 3ha section of this privately owned forest to administer management treatments. The 3ha is actually subdivided among six groups of volunteers (totaling 150 men and women) who have a friendly competition to restore the health of the forest. A cabin and outdoor cooking facilities have been constructed in the forest for the visitors who typically come in shifts of a few volunteers at any one time. While the volunteers do not make any purchases or payments to the forest owner, their volunteer work is of enormous consequence to the condition of the forest resource.

The owner of the property described above accepts volunteer forestry workers because he believes that forests have a therapeutic value to those who participate in the volunteer work. Knight (1996) mentioned a case in his study, where tourists from Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto paid 20,000 yen each to participate in such voluntary forestry work. Although the forest owners in Knight’s case had originally conceived of this plan as a means of introducing the tourists (all women) to local bachelors, the tourists came for the express purpose of participating in forestry treatments with local foresters, and for the forest’s therapeutic value.

This study of Hobetsu’s forest owners assumes that the value placed on the forest by the forest owner would be reflected in their choice of a descriptive metaphor for ‘forest.’ Forest owners were asked to describe their forest properties in words other than ‘forest’ by selecting an alternate phrase, or suggesting their own, to complete the sentence ‘My forest property is like a ...’. The most popular response was ‘insurance plan’ at 42%. This was followed by ‘bank account’ at 23% and ‘sanctuary’ at 21%. Other responses were then grouped for analysis so that forest metaphors were scaled in a range of seven values from commercially oriented (‘bank account’) to nature oriented (‘sanctuary,’ see Table 3). The dividing line between commercially oriented and nature oriented metaphors was determined to be the response ‘*zansai*’ or ‘prized possession.’ Because the two Chinese characters used for ‘*zansai*’ imply a created possession, it was felt this response falls at the metaphorical intersection between marketable commodities and nature as a sanctuary of life.

⁸ These reasons are similar to those reported by Knight (1996) for a Japanese hot-spring town where opponents to tourism spoke of increased traffic and a sense that their town was no longer theirs.

on the characteristics of a bank account or insurance plan. Those forest owners who are in occupations unrelated to agriculture are not dependent on their forest for income at all and might not place a commercial identity on their forests. For analysis, occupations were arranged in a scale from agricultural employment to office employment, with retired at the midpoint (agriculture, forestry, housewife, retired, service industry, and office work). However, regression analysis failed to confirm a relationship between occupation and metaphor responses, or between occupation and the importance of tourism.

Brunt and Courtney (1999) investigated the relationship between a respondent's employment and their support for tourism as a development option. However, they concluded there is little evidence to support a link. Instead, they suggested a link between a respondent's age and their views of tourism. The preponderance of retirees in the Hobetsu sample made this a difficult suggestion to test although the results would appear to partly support Brunt and Courtney, with a notable difference.⁹ Where Brunt and Courtney found that older respondents were most likely to oppose tourism, the Hobetsu results provided some indication that the older respondents were the more supportive of tourism. The age of respondents is positively correlated to their support for tourism, with an x -coefficient of 0.5 and a standard error of 0.31.

Whereas a statistical link exists between the metaphor chosen to describe 'forest' and support for tourism, as well as between age and support for tourism, no relationship has been confirmed between respondent age and their forest metaphor. The small data set resulting from the Hobetsu survey places some limitations on the analysis. Although a larger sample size might indicate additional relationships among the variables, the results of the Hobetsu survey are sufficient in demonstrating the importance of assessing the value of the forest resource through an owner's choice of metaphor.

CONCLUSION

In their responses, Hobetsu's forest owners indicate that the willingness to support tourism is dependent on the values applied to the forest by any given forest owner. For any forest tourism initiative to prove successful, it must be presented in a way that fits with a forest owner's concept of their forest's value or use. In the case of the Hobetsu survey respondents who favored sanctuary-related metaphors, a successful presentation of tourism as an option might depend on emphasizing the therapeutic value of forests as a marketable value to voluntary forest laborers. In the majority of cases, successful presentations might stress the potential of forest owners to derive secondary forest products (modeled on agricultural tourism concepts) for sale to visitors.

Forest owners in Hobetsu face many of the same negative trends that affect all of the Japanese countryside; among these are low domestic production in the face of low-cost imports and increasing age of workers. Efforts by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (through the cooperatives) to reverse these

⁹ From the sample of Hobetsu's forest owners, 52% are over the age of 66, although the same age group represents only 15% of the national population.

trends have the potential to succeed provided they rely on the strengths of the cooperatives and recognize the characteristics of forest owners.

The Hobetsu Forest Owner Cooperative is well suited to pass recommendations to forest owners and expect the recommendations to be followed by providing funding arrangements. Forest owners are overwhelmingly supportive of their cooperative and feel they (and their forests) have benefited from cooperative assistance and secondary product information services. While tourism as such has little support among forest owners as an option, it has not yet been presented in a way that resembles a secondary product or a therapeutic element. If evidence can be presented to forest owners of instances where some form of tourism led to an enhancement of the forest property (as in the case of the volunteer foresters), or provided an immediate income supplement to the forest owner, it may prove to be of greater interest. Forest owners are not a homogenous community and, as illustrated by the Hobetsu survey, efforts to promote forest options must first consider the diversity of values which owners place on their forests as well as the factors behind those values.

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