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Article

Tourism's Impacts on Rural Livelihood in the Sustainability of an Aging Community in Japan

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Abstract: Rural tourism, which is often interpreted as rural development initiatives, has been extensively studied in a Japanese context; however, this has been typically observed at a community level, and the host households were assumed as homogeneous. Therefore, this article explores rural tourism's potential as a tool for territorial development in Japan, and augments established literature by studying how rural tourism contributes to sustainable livelihoods at the household level in an aging community and a developed economy. For this purpose, a qualitative study observed a farm inn group in the town of Noto, a Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System (GIAHS) site in Japan. Three hypotheses were tested: (1) rural tourism in a remote/isolated region has changed the host households' livelihood assets; (2) the economic benefits from rural tourism are marginal to host households; and (3) the benefits other than income earnings exceed the economic benefits for aging communities. The residents' quality of life has improved in this super-aging rural community, although the economic benefits are still marginal to most host households. Tourists have brought vitality to these remote villages, and a lack of young residents to inherit these farm inn businesses presents a bottleneck to the industry's future development. Social capital should be strengthened by forming social networks with the local government and private sectors.

Keywords: agricultural heritage; community participation; farm inn; GIAHS; livelihood assets; territorial development

1. Introduction

Tourism is a rapidly growing industry, currently one of the largest worldwide, and anticipated to continue to increase in the future [1]. The tourism industry has been promoted as a common tool to develop and regenerate rural areas, and particularly in the rural settings greatly affected by the decline of traditional farming activities. Rural tourism is perceived as a job generator and accelerator of growing economies in both developing [2–4] and developed economies [5–9]. Further, rural tourism significantly contributes to regional economic growth by activating the local economy and funneling the money spent by tourists into industries up- and downstream to the tourism itself [10–12].

The socioeconomic impacts of rural tourism on individuals and the community have been perceived as important, and particularly in less-developed countries. The development of rural tourism in richly biodiverse areas has helped local communities to achieve their goal of improved livelihood [2,13]. Tourism participation has also helped local populations increase their income and substantially enhance their livelihood [14,15].

Although tourism's economic benefits are well-acknowledged, measuring tourism's economic impact on rural regions is still often ambiguous, as different approaches provide significantly different results [16]. Moreover, one study pointed out that tourism's economic benefits are likely marginal, and particularly so for rural regions without attractive, competitive tourism resources [17]. Therefore, it is important to consider a tourism project's effects on rural development not only economically, but also in its impact on the community through another dimension.

It has been difficult to assess the success of rural tourism-related initiatives that aim to benefit local communities as well as rural environments [18]. One challenge involves how to quantify tourism's impacts on communities and local livelihoods [19]. Therefore, it is necessary to develop a comprehensive framework for tourism's impact on individual farmers and communities. This study adopted as its analysis framework the broad concept of sustainable livelihood (SL), which has evolved from established perceptions of land, labor, social networks, and physical infrastructures [20,21].

Subsequently, this study explores rural tourism's potential as a tool for territorial development in Japan, and rural Japan in particular, as this region is motivated by the revival of rural communities. The rural revival plan can only be enacted by an evaluation of regional assets, the mobilization of local actors, associations' participation in large projects, and an enhancing of regions' competitiveness in a market globalization context [22,23].

Similar to other parts of the world, rural areas in Japan have experienced a decline in agricultural activities, the restructuring of rural society, and increasing farmland abandonment partially due to farmers' aging. Among all these challenges, aging in the rural population has jeopardized rural regions' sustainability. Japan is the first country in the world to enter a "super-aging" phase [24,25]. According to the World Health Organization, a society is categorized as "super-aged" if the aging rate surpasses 21% [26]; Japan has an aging rate of 26%, or the highest worldwide. The aging society in rural communities has created new challenges in rural tourism for individual operators [27] as well as community-level activities [28].

Tourism's economic impact on the rural community has been extensively discussed in a Japanese context, although research is still scarce regarding tourism's impact on the individual host [29]. This article will contribute to a lack of knowledge related to rural tourism from the Asian region [30]. Further, this study aims to clarify tourism's impacts on the rural livelihood at the household level regarding an aging community's sustainability, as well as the lessons and experiences regarding sustainable tourism development in Japan's super-aging community and developing economy. Additionally, the tourism industry's present growth as well as its organizational forms—including the leader's role in the organization and local governments' support of such businesses—are explored to clarify a specific territorial development paradigm. Experiences from Japan's rural tourism practices will provide lessons from which other countries may learn, as countries will increasingly become aging or super-aging societies and face the same socio-demographic challenges as Japan.

2. Overview

2.1. Territorial Development

The territorial development paradigm has appeared in Europe since the 1990s, and particularly France, and considers not only macro-economic variables and processes, but regional factors as drivers for economic development and growth [31]. Territorial development is a closely related but preferable terminology to "local development", as the former does not simply mean "small-scale development". Therefore, the territorial development process is not simply a way of optimizing assets that already exist, but of revealing previously unknown resources; in this regard, it constitutes an innovation [31].

The territorial approach aims to make places more competitive and attractive in a national context and within the global environment. Territories are considered as places with their own histories and identities, in which heritages and local assets are used as elements and drivers for regional construction and sustainable development [32,33].

2.2. Rural Tourism's Sustainability in Japan

In Japan, "rural tourism", "green tourism", and "ecotourism" are commonly and interchangeably used to refer to tourist activities in rural areas, and have been defined as a tool to revitalize rural communities and benefit their residents [29,34,35]. Further, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (MAFF) defines "green tourism" as rural-stay leisure activities, such as appreciating nature and local cultures, and interacting with locals in rural, mountainous, or coastal villages [34].

Rural tourism began in the 1970s to parallel the urbanization that followed World War II [36]. Large resorts were then constructed in the late 1980s and early 1990s to solve the problem of decreasing rural populations, and especially in mountainous regions [34,36]. However, most of these resorts closed due to Japan's bubble economy; although developed in rural areas, these pre-1990s tourism projects were established with external capital investments.

Since the 1990s, the Japanese government has promoted rural tourism under the slogan "Green Tourism", which the central government announced as a new form of responsible tourism to attract urbanites to mountainous agricultural areas, and to live and work on farms. However, recent debates strongly suggest that "Green Tourism" has not substantially impacted or led to any major change in rural tourism, as the agricultural sector and rural communities have declined rapidly in recent decades, and a majority of rural areas are uncompetitive in tourist markets except for some vast landscapes in Hokkaido [36]. Rural tourism can only develop if rural communities and farmlands are well-conserved and managed. Its sustainability lies in a healthy rural community and working farmlands.

3. Research Methodology and Hypothesis

3.1. Linking Rural Tourism to Territorial Development

This study proposes a link between rural tourism development strategies to territorial development policies by defining three key elements, as tourism and culture can stimulate rural employment and investment. The first element is economic, and is always the focus of government agencies across all levels as well as local communities. The second element is an integrated resource utilization dimension, which is inherent to territorial development approaches that make places more competitive and attractive to guests, both domestic and overseas. This trait is vital for unfavorable rural areas without characteristic tourism resources. The third dimension is a territorial governance and organization formed with multi-actor participation and cooperation, which corresponds to the territory as a social construct. The administration has played a vital role in invigorating less-favored areas in Japan [37].

3.2. Study Hypotheses

This study proposes three research hypotheses based on the questions presented in the Introduction and research context. First, Hypothesis 1 responds to the question regarding rural tourism's perceived influences on the host community's livelihood. Hypothesis 2 focuses on economic benefits, which administrative bodies typically consider a central factor in regional development. Hypothesis 3 considers a super-aging society and focuses on the other effects tourism might induce in these regions.

Hypothesis 1. *Rural tourism in a remote/isolated region has changed host households' livelihood assets.*

Hypothesis 2. *The economic benefits from rural tourism are marginal for host households.*

Hypothesis 3. *Benefits other than income earnings exceed the economic benefits for aging communities.*

4. Research Process

4.1. Survey Site

The research clarifies tourism's impacts on rural livelihood, and specifically regarding sustainability in an aging community, by performing a case study of the farm inn (*nouka minshuku* in Japanese) group, called *Shunran-no-Sato* (hereafter, "Shunran"), from the Noto peninsula in central Japan's Ishikawa prefecture. A Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System (GIAHS) project was launched by the United Nations' Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) to conserve and dynamically manage ingenious agricultural knowledge systems and landscapes. In line with global conservation trends in traditional farming and local culture and traditions, Satoyama Satoumi Landscapes (socio-ecological production landscapes and seascapes) from the Noto peninsula in Ishikawa prefecture was designated as the first of two pilot sites in Japan by the FAO's GIAHS program in 2011.

The Shunran group (Figure 1) is in the hills near the center of the Noto peninsula, which has no outstanding tourist attractions. These farm households are distributed in and around the peripheral areas of two villages, Miyachi and Sakeo in Noto Town. This area was famous for timber production, and its foresters became wealthy several decades ago. Many houses were commodious, solid, and durable. Additionally, a distinguishable rustic landscape and architecture, combining black tiled roofs and white walls, has enthralled tourists both domestic and abroad.

The Shunran-no-Sato Executive Committee was established in 1996 as a local-level committee aiming at regional regeneration by activating multiple industries: farming, forestry, and construction. Among these, the Shunran-no-Sato farm inn group (hereafter, the "Shunran FIG") manages its farm inn businesses, or farmhouses called *minshuku*. These *minshuku* are family-operated, Japanese-style bed and breakfasts that offer Japanese-style tatami mat rooms with traditional futon bedding mattresses to sleep on. Currently, the Shunran FIG consists of 47 traditional houses (Figure 2) distributed across the surrounding 12 communities. The photo (Figure 2) was taken in early spring, and depicts a typical farmhouse backed by a hill; it faces paddy fields after this region's harvest.

The first four farm inns were established in 2003, and more farm households subsequently began to participate in the tourism industry. The traditional *minshuku* farmhouse provides accommodations for only one group of visitors per night, with an accommodation fee of approximately 9500–13,000 JPY per person per night. While this may vary based on the number of tourists in a group, it includes breakfast, dinner, and taxes regardless of the season. The project also offers farmhouse guestrooms to eco-tourists and an opportunity to participate in traditional agricultural activities, such as rice harvesting and mushroom picking.

In 2006, the Ishikawa prefectural office subsidized the Shunran FIG to transform an abandoned local primary school into Kobushi, a lodging facility with ten rooms that also functions as the center of the Shunran FIG. The accommodation fee for Kobushi is 7000 JPY per room per night, without food.

Tourism development in the Shunran FIG can be attributed to the Ishikawa prefecture's promotional efforts since 2008. Public funding accounts for 4 million JPY (equivalent to 40,000 USD), which has been invested in transportation for elementary school field trips from the nearby metropolis [1]. Additionally, the Ishikawa prefectural office's international tourism section spent another 3.4 million JPY for an international exchange [38], in that the prefectural officer visited Taiwan and participated in a school field trip meeting. School field trip-related agencies in mainland China, Taiwan, and Korea were then invited to Ishikawa prefecture.

Although public funding was not directly used for tourism development in the Shunran FIG, the Ishikawa prefecture provided a series of public subsidies to improve the natural environment and surrounding landscape. In 2011 alone, the prefecture subsidized 7 million JPY toward relevant projects in the Shunran FIG [39].

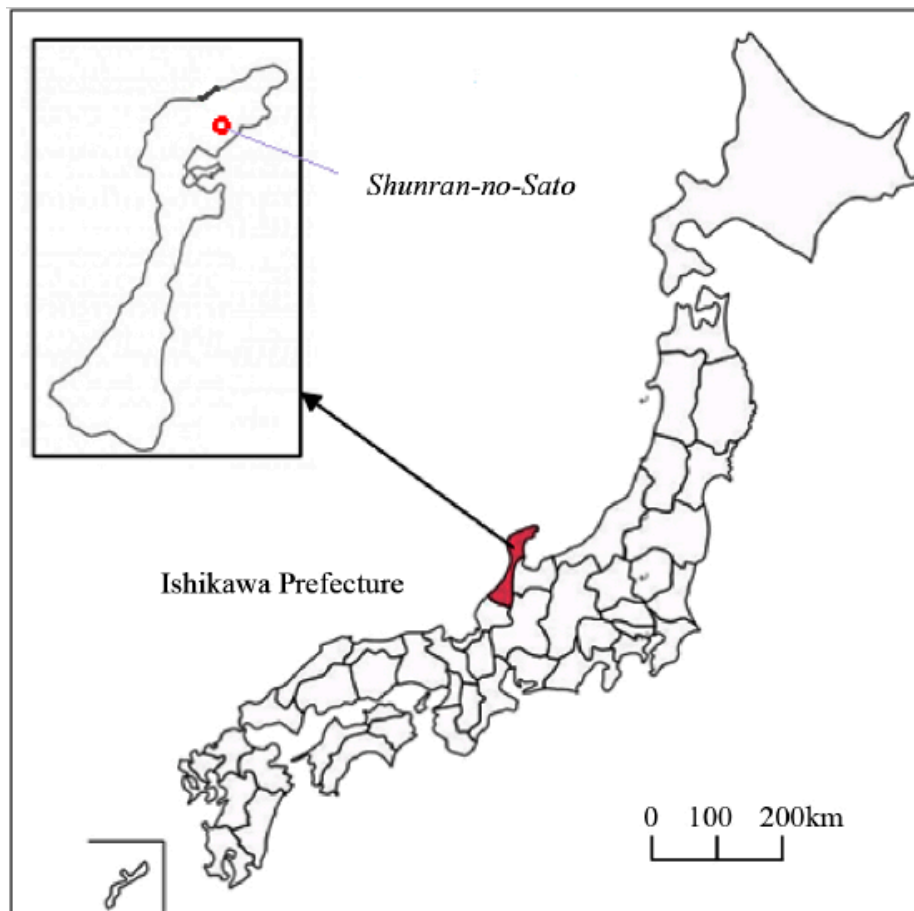


Figure 1. Location of Shunran-no-Sato.



Figure 2. A typical local farm house now receives tourists in the Shunran-no-Sato farm inn group.

4.2. Data Collection

This study's data collection involves secondary data, including published papers, reports, and qualitative data from theme-based, face-to-face interviews with host household owners. The researchers consulted the group leader, Mr. T., regarding the selection of interviewees. According to Mr. T., some farm inn hosts have refused to receive guests, or received fewer guests, due to age, their own health problems, or a family member's health. Subsequently, 17 host households that actively received guests were chosen to contact. The first author called the selected farm inn owners, explained the research purpose, and asked for their permission to visit their houses for interview. Ultimately, all the contacted owners were successfully interviewed. Interviews were based on a prepared question list and lasted approximately 30 min to an hour. Interviews were recorded with interviewees' permission. The in-depth interviews were conducted from 3–7 March 2017 during the winter season, when tourists rarely visit this region.

4.3. Sustainable Livelihood Assessment Approach

This study adopted a system of indicators and variables for community-based tourism that includes five different types of livelihood capital: physical, natural, human, financial, and social capital [39–44].

A livelihood is comprised of the capabilities, assets, and activities required as a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and can maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets—both now and in the future—while not undermining the natural resource base [42].

Natural capital refers to the farmland and forest; the challenges jeopardizing Japan's biodiversity primarily involve the underutilization of natural resources while not over-utilizing them, an issue common in developing countries. This study addresses the active production and utilization of nature resources as an improvement and enhancement of natural capital.

Physical capital typically refers to household properties, such as its livestock and the farmer's house itself; and the village infrastructure, such as roads, bridges, and parking facilities.

Human capital considers the available skills, knowledge, health, and work ability.

This study addresses financial capital in terms of the salary income, pensions, and tourism-related income. As some interviewees were part-time farmers, their incomes may have consisted of salaries external to the farm, in addition to farm work. Those aged 60 or older at the time of the interview also noted that they received certain pension amounts.

This study also considered facts from the survey site as well as previous literature [44], and included social networks or the "associational life", which links the individuals, social norms, and values defined by the widely shared cultural beliefs and values that facilitate a society's function [45].

4.4. Capital Assets' Measurement Design

Five types of livelihood capital assets were identified, and rate scale methods were adopted to compare them and allow for meaningful interpretation. The interview contents were analyzed and classified as the positive impacts of gains, neutral aspects, or negative impacts of losses. A value of 1, 0, or −1 was given to each capital asset, except for financial assets.

This study followed the income-scoring method proposed by Qian et al. [44] and Chen et al. [46]. Tourism-related income was collected as the actual value earned in 2016, then changed to comparable indicators to interpret the research results' significance. The average income at the surveyed region, Noto Town, which was reported as 259.2 million JPY (Based on the statistical data released by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications [38], this study calculated Noto Town's average income by dividing its total amount of taxable income by the number of taxpayers.) in 2017, was chosen as the control value [47]. This control value was then compared with the actual value of host households' farm inn-related income. Financial asset indices of 0–0.33, 0.34–0.66, and 0.67–1 are interpreted as

“poor”, “average”, and “good”, respectively. The calculation was made more convenient by choosing three critical values to represent the different degrees of change in financial assets: 0.33, 0.66, and 1 referred to poor (small), average, and good (large) scales, respectively. If the tourism-related income was less than ($0.5 \times$ the control value), it was scored as low and given a scale value of 0.33; if the tourism-related income surpassed ($0.5 \times$ the control value) but was less than the control value, it was scored as average and given a scale value of 0.66; and if the tourism-related income (or “TI” in the below equation) surpassed the control value, it was scored as high and given a scale value of 1:

$$I_1 = \text{Positive\%} \times 1 + \text{Neutral\%} \times 0 + \text{Negative\%} \times (-1)$$

$$I_2 = (\text{TI} < 0.5 \times \text{control value\%}) \times 0.33 + (0.5 \times \text{control value} < \text{TI} < \text{control value\%}) \times 0.66 + (\text{control value} < \text{TI\%}) \times 1$$

Finally, the livelihood assets’ total scores were derived by:

$$\text{LA} = (\text{PC} + \text{NC} + \text{HC} + \text{FC} + \text{SC})/5 + 1$$

The calculation was conveniently performed by assuming that all asset values before the tourism development are 1, where: I_1 includes physical capital, natural capital, human capital, and social capital; I_2 includes financial capital; LA represents the livelihood assets; PC represents physical capital; NC represents natural capital; HC represents human capital; FC represents financial capital; and SC represents social capital.

5. Results

5.1. Profile of Tourism Development and Farm Inn Owners

5.1.1. Tourist Growth Statistics

Tourist numbers in the Shunran FIG have rapidly grown; Figure 3 illustrates the visitor numbers from 2006–16. The total visitors increased from approximately 1200 in 2006 to over 12,000 in 2016, including those who stayed overnight and day-trippers, or those who engage in service experiences, take baths, and hold meetings. Among these visitors, the number who stayed in traditional houses increased, from approximately 527 in 2006 to 5219 in 2016. Visitors staying at Kobushi also increased, from 681 in 2006 to 6905 in 2016. International tourists also visited the Shunran FIG, and this number increased to over 1000 in 2015. Approximately 10% of all visitors were international, and a majority were from other Asian countries. These visitors were not evenly distributed throughout the year, as the peak season—when group visitors, primarily students, are the most numerous—occurs from June to August. Families and other groups visit on weekends, at the year-end, and on New Year’s holidays; visitors rarely come during the winter.

International visitors have expressed an interest in the Shunran FIG’s genuine Japanese experience, and visitor numbers from abroad will continue to grow. However, this growth is still sensitive to political and environmental stability. For example, bookings from international visitors were canceled due to the Great Northwest Earthquake in 2011. Moreover, frequent political conflicts and disputes among Asian countries will also negatively impact the group’s receiving of foreign visitors.

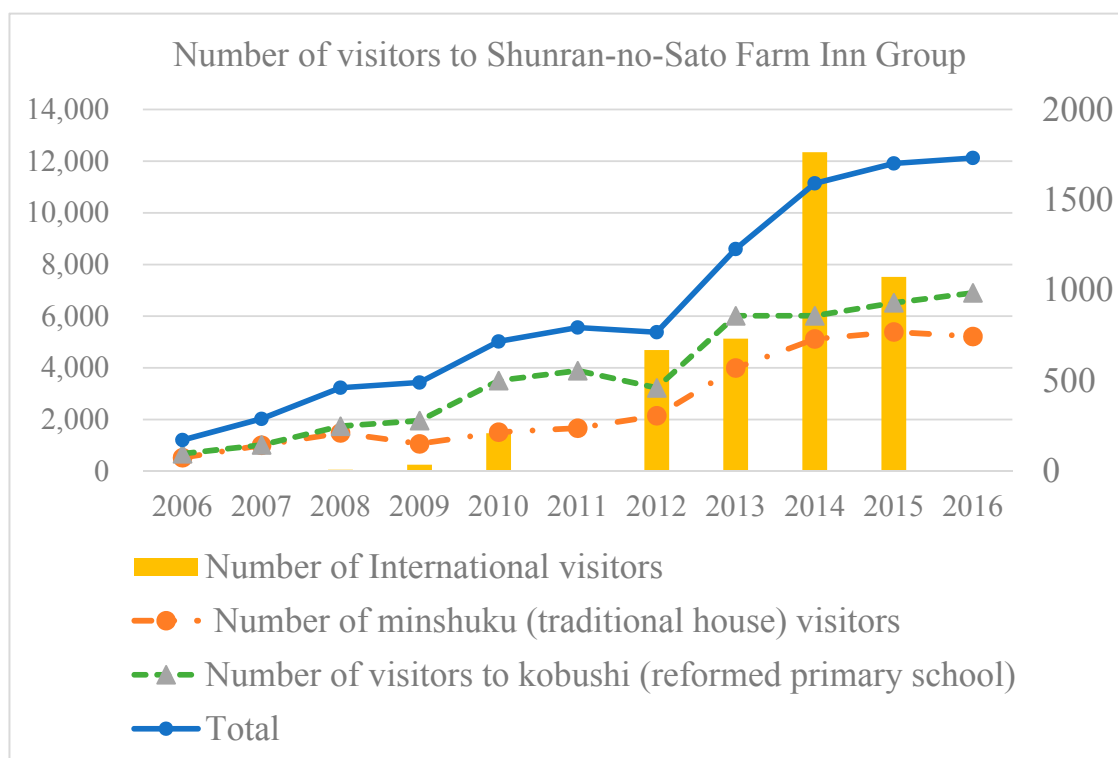


Figure 3. The growth of tourism in the Shunran-no-Sato Farm Inn Group. Source: Shunran-no-Sato Farm Inn Group.

5.1.2. Characteristics of Farm Inn Owners

Table 1 displays descriptive data regarding the farm inn owners' capital assets. On average, farm inn owners are 70.3 years old, with ages ranging from 56 to 84 years old. Among all 17 respondents, only three (18.0%) were younger than 65 years of age, with a consequent aging rate of 82%. In addition to their farm inn businesses, all participants were also engaged with other jobs, such as other farm work or construction, among others.

Table 1. Descriptive data of surveyed host households' capital assets.

	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Age of host household head	70.3	8.00	56	84
Labor (number of persons) involved with tourism	1.87	0.35	1	2
Farm house area (m ²)	291.1	124.22	158.4	495
Farm house age (years)	74	52.00	24	200
Farmland area, except paddy fields (100 m ²)	7.31	9.20	0	30
Paddy fields' area (100 m ²)	36.1	42.87	0	140
Forest area (10,000 m ²)	3.82	10.11	0	40
Length of tourism-related experience (years)	6.4	3.76	1	14
Tourism-related income (10,000 JPY)	113.6	145.00	10	500
Total income (10,000 JPY)	332.6	220.80	100	860

1 USD = 110 JPY.

Farm inn owners typically possess a large house, with an average area of 291 m². These farm houses are an average of 74 years old, and the oldest is approximately 200 years old.

Each farm inn's human capital input varied from one to two persons, with an average of two persons, and in a few cases only one person was engaged with the farm inn business. A majority of these are couples, while only two families noted that their son or daughter would inherit and continue

their farm inn business. Another family's daughter said that she would return to help her mother after the former's retirement.

Most of the farm inn owners possess farmland, including rice paddies and forests, with two exceptions: a retired enterprise employee and an owner who emigrated from Kanazawa City. Although many of the respondents held large tracts of fields or mountain forests, they explained to us that these were abandoned and far from their homes, and they only cultivated nearby farmland.

A majority of this study's farm inn owners did not have any cash income from crops or forestry products and lived on varying pensions. Only two were less than 60 years old and had no pensions. However, many local farmers planted vegetables, rice, and other crops for self-subsistence. Tourism-related income in 2016 was 900,000 JPY on average, with amounts ranging from 100,000 JPY to 5 million JPY. Combined with pensions and other income, the farm inn owners' average income was 3 million JPY on average and ranged from 1 to 8.6 million JPY.

5.2. The Tourist Industry's Changes to Livelihood Assets

Table 2 summarizes the tourist industry's positive and negative impacts on the local community and farm inn owners, which was presented based on a sustainable livelihood assessment approach.

Figure 4 illustrates the changes in five livelihood assets before and after participation in a farm inn business. The scale values of natural, physical, and human capital increased on a modest scale, while physical capital experienced a slight decline. In contrast, social capital clearly increased.

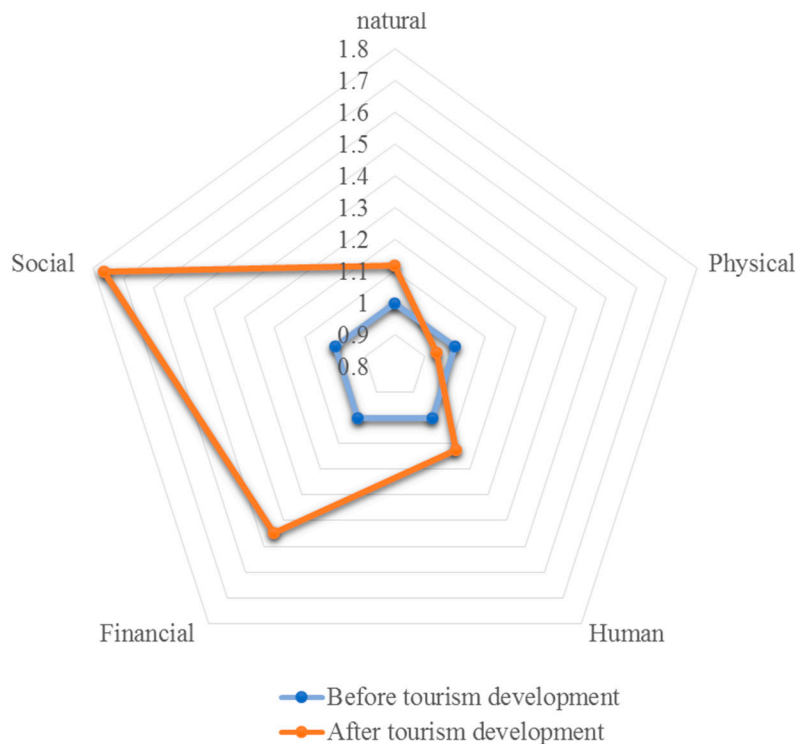


Figure 4. Shunran-no-Sato farm inn owners' capital asset values before and after the tourism business' introduction.

Table 2. Summary of farm inn tourism’s impacts on individual livelihood assets.

	Positive	Negative
Natural resources	Abandoned farmland was transformed to wild edible plant fields; landscape is conserved	
Physical assets	Tourism facilities were constructed, such as parking lots and signposts	Subsidies needed to repair houses
Human resources	Temporary labor opportunities, such as preparing lunches/dinners for guests The elderly avoid social withdrawal Work opportunities for aging farmers The prevention of dementia in aging farmers	
Financial assets	Tourism-related income supplements household income	Earnings are too small Tourism is seasonal
Social capital	Fun to interact with guests from remote areas, such as Hokkaido Meet foreigners from many countries Traditional rituals are preserved and performed to cater to tourists Revitalizes communities	Competition for guests among farm inn owners

5.2.1. Natural Capital

Tourist development has essentially functioned to conserve natural capital and, to a certain degree, has slowed the deterioration of natural resources in the surrounding areas, such as in abandoned farmlands and mountain forests. A majority of the food catering to tourists was produced on the farmers’ land or their neighbors’. A typical dinner consists of charcoal-grilled fish and wild plants, which were harvested in the spring and salt-preserved for use throughout the year. However, beef—the most popular Japanese cuisine—is not served here.

The Shunran group leader stated that they aim to revive old-style local food, and only locally produced food is used. In 1998, a small processing plant, Shunran-no-Sato Farm, was established to produce and sell processed seasonings and food such as miso, which is a traditional Japanese seasoning produced by fermenting soybeans with salt and the *Aspergillus oryzae* fungus, and sometimes with rice or barley. A farm to cultivate masu salmon (*Oncorhynchus masou masou*) was built in 2006 to provide fresh fish for this farm inn group.

5.2.2. Physical Capital

Rural Japan is typically well-equipped with physical capital. As aforementioned, the prefectural government has provided millions in subsidies to construct more tourist facilities, such as paving roads and constructing new buildings. A stop-over parking lot was built at the Miyachi village’s entrance, and signposts and village road directional guide posts were installed in 2012 (Figure 5). Public subsidies were also provided to reform the old traditional houses in Ishikawa prefecture.

However, a few respondents also mentioned costs related to receiving tourists. For example, elegant *wajima-nuri* lacquerware sets, which cost approximately 2000 to 3000 USD, are used to serve meals to tourists, even students. A small chip in the bowl’s edge can cost 50 USD to repair, and small pieces of lacquerware even go missing, maybe taken back by the guests.



Figure 5. Road direction signs and guide posts were installed in the village in 2012.

5.2.3. Human Capital

Locals received a small income if they were hired for temporary tourism-related work opportunities, such as preparing lunches for day-trippers and dinners for overnight visitors.

A majority of the respondents reported that their health improved by participating in such tourist activities. Otherwise, elderly farmers in remote rural areas typically withdraw from any social work and remain at home all day during the area's long, cold winters. Catering to student guests has brought much pleasure to their lives. Some hosts iterated that they felt happy to see that students enjoyed their stay in the rural region, and some even sent thank-you letters to the host family upon their return.

Some younger respondents (with ages in their 50s) stated that they tried to learn English. Many respondents described to us how they communicated with foreigners with pictures or gestures. By observing these foreigners' dietary habits, they came to understand that they sometimes needed to prepare bread for breakfast, although rice is a regular breakfast item in Japanese rural areas.

5.2.4. Financial Capital

The number of visitors to the Shunran FIG has increased steadily in recent years (Figure 4). The farm inn owners' total income is equivalent to "tourism-related income + pension + 6". Further, tourist revenue was perceived as an important supplement to other incomes for those with low-level pensions, or approximately 50,000 JPY per month (equivalent to 500 USD monthly), a standard for farmers. Only retirees from large companies, the government, or education receive higher pensions of approximately 200,000 JPY per month (equivalent to 2000 USD).

Tourism-related income is an important supplement to the household, and respondents' dependence on tourism significantly varied (Figure 6). Relatively younger respondents who were less than 65 years old were more dependent on tourism-related income than older respondents. Nevertheless, most respondents expressed concern as the annual amount was not high enough, and their supplemental income may vary. Approximately eight of the 17 respondents earned over 1 million JPY (equivalent to 10,000 USD), and the highest tourism-related earnings reached 5 million JPY.

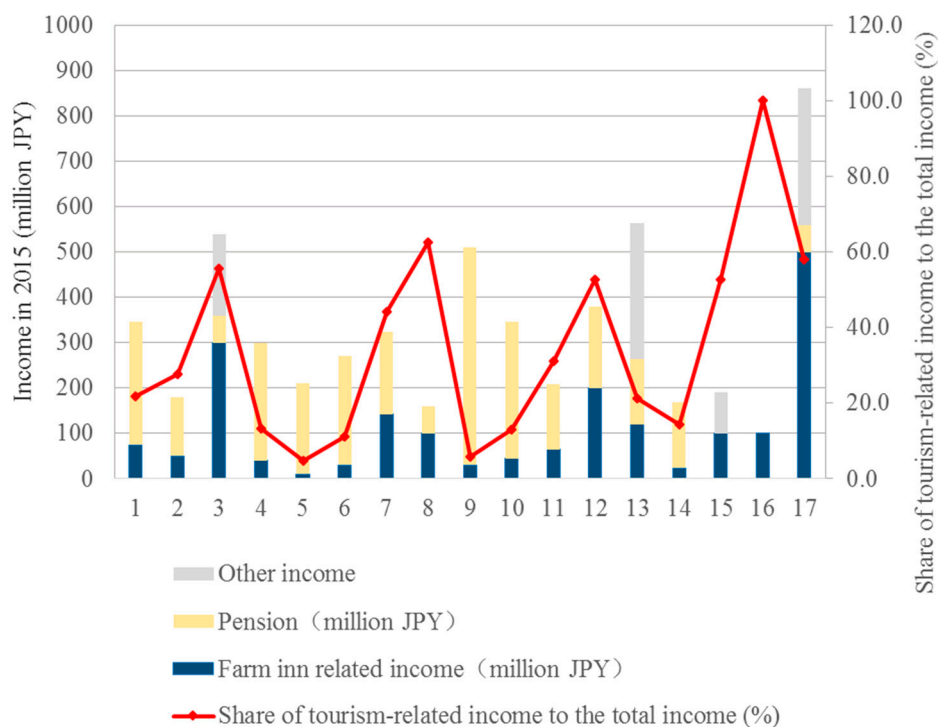


Figure 6. Contribution of farm inn-related income to household income.

5.2.5. Social Capital

First, the connection with the outside world was perceived as the primary benefit obtained from tourism development. Consistently, most of the respondents noted the increased opportunity to interact and communicate with domestic guests from far distances, and even international guests from many other countries. Of the 17 interviewees, 10 explicitly mentioned that tourism has enriched their life experience, and they received gifts and letters when the tourists returned home. The farm inn group has also received many students from the nearby metropolis' primary and secondary schools. Some respondents recalled that these students greatly cheered them up, as children are currently a rare occurrence in the community.

Second, tourism development can contribute to the sustainability and conservation of traditional rituals and cultural rites. For example, summer festivals are held to entertain group guests. One respondent stated that the festivals had mostly ceased due to farmers' aging, but were temporarily revived to cater to guests; these festivities attracted the elderly to observe the community.

However, one respondent mentioned a negative impact on the community's social capital. She was perplexed by the competition for tourists, as many farm inn owners wanted to accommodate more guests. She felt this was unfair, as her husband substantially contributed to activities to promote the attraction to tourism destinations, but she hosted fewer guests than other owners. In summary, the search for more tourism-related income has negatively impacted ties within the community to a certain extent.

6. Discussion

6.1. Rural Tourism's Impact on Host Households' Livelihood Assets

This study's findings support Hypothesis 1, in that rural tourism in a remote, isolated region has changed the host households' livelihood assets. The development of rural tourism has positively affected livelihood assets. Further, farmhouse inn businesses have helped host families increase their

financial assets, promoted the effective utilization of their natural assets to some degree, and largely enhanced their social and human assets while slightly impacting their physical assets.

Consistent with previous studies in Japan, the social impact of tourism-related activities is more important than economic and environmental impacts [48]. According to Nishimura [48], such tourist activities allow rural communities with less-appealing tourism resources to create strong bonds among themselves and foster self-confidence and pride in these communities. The current study's findings supplement current research, which reveals the joy in witnessing this rural revival, as well as the improved health through the connection with the outside world and the increasing motivation to learn foreign languages and absorb foreign culture at the host-individual level.

6.2. Tourism's Impact on Territorial Development in Japan Rural

This study's survey partially supports Hypothesis 2, in that the economic benefits from rural tourism are marginal for the majority of host households. The guest inn industry in the surveyed area has provided residents a means to diversify their traditional agricultural industries. However, rural tourism's economic effects on the local community's financial assets were not generally substantial, although only a small portion of the guest inn owners depended on the tourism industry for a majority of their income. This finding parallels previous rural tourism literature relevant to other regions in Japan, which also noted that direct economic benefits from tourism were limited [48–52]. In contrast to a developed economic context, community-based tourism has typically been promoted as a policy to alleviate poverty in developing countries, such as China [44], India [53], Botswana [13,15], and Nepal [14].

This study's findings support Hypothesis 3, in that the benefits—other than income earnings—exceed the economic benefits for aging communities. The opening of guest inn businesses has brought vitality to this remote village, improved the residents' quality of life, and enhanced their social connections to some extent. In addition to financial benefits, the psychological benefit is another major factor that has motivated the local community to participate in rural tourism. This result is consistent with previous research in Japan e.g., Reference [48]. Social capital is a key asset in a sustainable livelihood framework, and the residents' ability should be strengthened in terms of forming a network with the government and private sector through joint venture partnerships [13].

It is also noteworthy that a slight negative effect exists in the rural network, which previous studies have failed to report. These farm inn hosts also compete for tourists with other farm households in the same group, as well as with other farm inn groups in Japan. Hence, it is a significant issue that the group leaders should seriously and carefully consider to foster the development of healthy tourism.

6.3. The Implications of Sustainable Rural Tourism in a Super-Aging Society

Tourist numbers have continually grown in past years, which reflects the Shunran-no-Sato FIG as one successful case in Japan. Strong leadership has played a significant role in the group's success, and specifically during their beginning and early development periods in 2011 [54]. Financial subsidies from government administrations to build infrastructure and rural landscapes is also one important factor for tourism development in this case study. In other parts of Japan, local governments were considered a primary driver of farm inn groups, e.g., Reference [55].

However, the ongoing population loss and aging has jeopardized guest inn businesses' sustainability. Specifically, the aging rate for farm inn hosts is extremely high in this case study, which is similar to other parts of Japan. The survey also found that only a small portion of the business owners had definite succession plans involving their children. Hence, it is still vital that younger populations migrate to rural regions to continue the tourism industry in the future. Moreover, it is more practical for some retirees to join the rural tourism business; as one respondent mentioned her daughter would inherit the farm house after her retirement.

7. Conclusions and Research Limitations

The Sustainable Livelihood Framework (SLF) analysis suggested that residents' assets (natural, physical, financial, human, and social capital) have been improved to some extent through tourism development. In the case of SI, Japan's tourism development is an effective tool for rural revitalization, even for remote rural areas without a competitive attraction. This study's findings indicate that SLF can be an effective tool to quantify tourism-related activities' impacts on the rural community, which all administrative levels can subsequently apply to gauge rural revival projects' efficiency.

Strong and effective leadership is an important factor for success in this case study. However, the succession of leadership, with the appearance of a next-strongest leader, will bring risk in effectively managing the SI group in the future. Thus, it is imperative that an intermediate organization is established to replace the current individual leader for sustainable management.

Further, sustainable management of this farm inn group poses another challenge, considering the high percent of aged guest inn owners; a majority of current hosts have no successors to continue their farm inn businesses. Consequently, it is practical for the group leader to attract more retirees to participate in the tourism industry.

Given the condition of a super-aging population, therefore, a need exists for rural communities to diversify into domestic tourism and small-scale enterprises [15]. A working farmland and vigorous community are also considered a foundation for this industry. Rural tourism positively impacts rural revitalization, but given that the survey site is located far from the nearest metropolis as well as the highly competitive rural tourist market in Japan, it may be difficult to rapidly increase the number of tourists to this region in the future. A competitive natural attraction is important, and a working farmland is also vital for rural tourism. Therefore, this study concludes that public policies are necessary to strengthen farming and community-building as these impacts how rural tourism is conducted. Rural tourism in this case study has fully taken advantage of present physical and natural assets to augment cultural constructs to some extent.

However, this case study has several limitations. First, a questionnaire survey should have been added to the in-depth interview. Quantitative data are also needed to gain a better understanding of tourism hosts' perceptions of the impacts on their livelihood. Second, the sample size of 17 households is small, which could render the sample less representative of all farming households in Japan. It is anticipated that further research should be conducted in other farm inn groups in Japan to create a more comprehensive knowledge of Japan's rural tourism industry. Third, tourism's impacts on social capital could be more deeply understood by considering rural Japan's rich traditional cultural resources, which is a major outcome to be anticipated from future rural tourism development in Japan. Finally, future research should include a demand analysis—including a target group analysis and marketing strategies—which is necessary for successful rural tourism [17].

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