

Responsible animal tourism in Japan: Opportunities for a ‘guilt-free’ future

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Abstract

In 2013, stories began appearing on English-language social media featuring several unique tourist attractions in Japan suitable for animal lovers. These attractions were portrayed as idyllic havens for wildlife that were united by a common narrative: the animals were free, cute, abundant, and eager to interact with tourists. Many social media stories went viral, propelling places that had until then been largely unknown to international tourists into the spotlight and, in some cases, resulting in a dramatic rise in visitor numbers. This short communication examines the changing reputation of these attractions in light of animal welfare critiques and discusses opportunities for Japan to develop more responsible animal tourism. I argue that Japan has an opportunity to work towards making responsible, ‘guilt-free’ animal tourism a reality and that doing so will generate a climate more conducive to supporting the international tourist market while also creating positive change for animals.

Keywords

Responsible tourism
Animal welfare
International tourists
Social media
Japan

Introduction

In 2013, stories began to appear on English-language social media featuring several unique tourist attractions in Japan, which were promoted as being suitable for animal lovers. These attractions were portrayed as idyllic havens for wild or feral animals such as rabbits, cats, foxes, monkeys and deer. Despite this range of species, a common narrative emerged: in general, these animals were free, cute, abundant, and eager to interact with tourists. Many of the social media stories went viral, propelling places that had until then been largely unknown to international tourists into the spotlight and, in some cases, resulting in a dramatic rise in visitor numbers. This short communication examines the changing reputation of these unorthodox attractions in light of recent public critiques of animal welfare and discusses opportunities for Japan to develop more responsible animal tourism.

The rise and fall of Japan’s cute animal attractions

Before the pandemic, there was a push towards growing international tourist arrivals and diversifying Japan’s inbound visitor portfolio (Sharpley & Kato, 2021). In support of this aim, Andonian et al. (2016) advocated harnessing the potential of satisfied tourists to act as ‘ambassadors’ for Japan across social media platforms. The viral popularity of several animal tourist attractions seemed to provide supporting evidence for the role that influencers and other social media users could play in tourism promotion. Ōkunoshima, also colloquially known in English as ‘Rabbit Island’, was one of the destinations that became an internet sensation. Usui et al.’s (2018) study indicates that a dramatic rise in visitation to the island, which saw international tourist numbers increase from 378 in 2013 to 17,215 in 2015, was largely the result of social media exposure showing food-bearing tourists being chased or climbed on by dozens of rabbits. This example demonstrates the strong appeal of cuteness, or *kawaii* (かわいい), in Japanese animal tourism (Crossley, 2020b).

However, not long after achieving this international

acclaim, new stories started circulating online condemning the attractions for poor animal welfare. Ōkunoshima and Japan’s cat islands were critiqued for their lack of veterinary care, widespread disease, unregulated animal population expansion and dependency on tourists for food (Hanson, 2017; Platt, 2016). Owl cafés in Tokyo faced criticism for keeping owls permanently tethered and disrupting their natural nocturnal sleep pattern (Kerr, 2017). Miyagi Zao Fox Village also came under fire for its unnatural population density, fighting between the foxes, and barren cages, which resulted in several petitions calling for the attraction to be closed down (Crossley, 2020b). In addition to articles published by professional animal advocates and journalists, tourists also began sharing their experiences through social media with the aim of revealing what they saw as concealed ‘truths’ about these popular attractions.

Given that these negative appraisals only started to emerge online three years before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the subsequent closure of Japan’s border to international tourists, it has been difficult to gauge their impact on visitor numbers. However, they can be taken as indicative of the increasing consumer power that tourists have in making or breaking destinations, and the use of social media to mobilise boycotts of attractions that are considered unethical (Shaheer et al., 2018). In light of the close scrutiny that animal tourism is currently facing, websites promoting inbound tourism to Japan have started producing lists of supposedly ethical animal attractions, using labels such as ‘guilt-free’ (Owen, 2018) or ‘cool, not cruel’ (Finn, 2019). However, even recommendations such as these have begun to be questioned, particularly given that some controversial tourist attractions still regularly find their way onto lists of ‘ethical’ experiences.

Responsible animal tourism development

Japan’s international tourists are becoming more discerning and demanding regarding the welfare of animals in tourism. The question is, how will Japan’s tourism industry respond?

This paper has focused on English-language social media relating to Japanese animal tourism. However, English-speaking, inbound tourists in Japan were estimated to comprise only approximately 10% of those visiting Japan from outside of Asia, pre-pandemic (JNTO, 2018). In contrast, visitors from other Asian countries accounted for over 85% of inbound tourists to Japan and the majority of these came from China (JNTO, 2018). Given this pre-pandemic context and continued uncertainty regarding the future of international tourism, some industry stakeholders might view the animal welfare concerns of non-Asian tourists as peripheral. Furthermore, Moorhouse et al. (2019) have shown that Chinese tourists are less likely to question the management of wildlife tourist attractions than tourists of other nationalities, despite having a similar level of interest in animal welfare.

However, there are signs that Japan may be moving towards more responsible forms of animal tourism. Charities such as Wild Welfare have for years been working in partnership with zoos and aquaria in Japan to advocate for the needs of captive wildlife and provide training on welfare assessment and behavioural enrichment (Captive wild animal welfare, 2018). It is possible that the normalisation of higher welfare standards in public zoos and aquaria may put pressure on other animal attractions to conform to the changing expectations of consumers. In addition, moves have been made to improve the welfare of feral animals in non-captive tourism settings, such as the spaying and neutering of the majority of popular Aoshima Island's 200 cats in 2018 in order to reduce the feline population to a more sustainable level (Islanders put a stop to feline population, 2018).

Despite these developments, it is apparent that there is a lack of consensus among the Japanese public, tourism stakeholders and tourists — both domestic and international — regarding what 'responsible' animal tourism looks like. For example, not all residents on Aoshima supported the move to interfere with the cats' natural reproductive capacity (Islanders put a stop to feline population, 2018). Equally, Wild Welfare reports the challenge of working collaboratively with both Japan's animal welfare NGOs and zoo community, given their 'differences of opinion on zoos and aquariums' (Captive wild animal welfare, 2018). However, such debates and deliberations regarding animal welfare in tourism are the first steps towards enacting meaningful, sustainable change.

Conclusion

As international tourists become more conscious of animal welfare issues, concerns regarding the treatment of animals in tourism are increasingly being aired on social media. Prior to the pandemic, it had been suggested that international tourists could be enlisted to act as digital 'ambassadors' in aid of Japan's tourism promotion (Andonian et al., 2016). While this is still a possibility in the future, more needs to be done to address tourists' animal welfare concerns. The changing tone of online tourist recommendation lists, which are now often labelled as 'ethical' or 'guilt-free', are indicative of these concerns. Furthermore, it has been speculated that the pandemic may catalyse a reorientation of tourists' values towards greater ecological sustainability and compassion towards animals (Crossley, 2020a). Japan has an opportunity to work towards making responsible, 'guilt-free' animal tourism a reality; doing so will generate a climate more conducive to supporting the international tourist market while also creating positive change for animals.

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