

Tourism, rural revitalization, and young entrepreneurs

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Abstract

The quest for rural revitalization in the Japanese context looms large as socioeconomic and demographic changes accelerate. In this exploratory paper, we examine the extent to which in-migrants have a role to play in addressing the myriad challenges that arise in rural contexts in Wakayama Prefecture. Our particular focus is on the links between tourism, rural revitalization, and young entrepreneurs. We discovered that multiple drivers are acting to attract young in-migrants, especially young entrepreneurs to rural townships. Very often, these are related to a desire to help address the challenges apparent in rural communities, especially if it is where they grew up. Additionally, and predictably, health, well-being and lifestyle benefits are other key motivators behind the urban-rural migration. However, there are many constraints that in-migrants must overcome and these are related to practical, as well as government policy related shortcomings.

Keywords

Rural tourism
Rural revitalization
Urban-rural migration
Young entrepreneurs
Sustainable tourism

Introduction

The quest for rural revitalization in the Japanese context looms large as socioeconomic and demographic changes in what is widely referred to as the post-growth context, become more apparent in its impacts (Klien, 2020). These developments are not unique to Japan with many highly developed and post-growth economies exhibiting similar tensions in the distinct trajectories and associated prospects of the rural versus the urban setting. Typically, rural areas are considered laden down by a multitude of issues including increased urbanization (of younger cohorts especially), rapidly ageing population, negative birth rates, social services limitations, and the decline of traditional industries (agriculture) (Klien, 2020; Qu & Cheer, 2021), among other binding constraints.

In this exploratory reportage of a larger, multi-stage and ongoing study, we examine the broad extent to which in-migrants have a role to play in addressing the myriad challenges that arise in rural contexts in Wakayama Prefecture. Focus is placed on how the wider visitor economy, underpinned by tourism and the interventions of young entrepreneurs, can have an influence over the trajectories of rural communities. In many respects, young entrepreneurs represent a ‘silver bullet’ of sorts because they help address many of the binding constraints that underline the pressing need for revitalization — they are young, tend to come with highly developed skills and enterprise, most often make the urban-rural shift for family and lifestyle reasons, and have established networks that help them overcome the rural-urban divide through the exploitation of personal, professional, and business linkages.

That tourism and rural revitalization is juxtaposed alongside the interventions of outsiders who then become in-migrants and enterprise starters is unsurprising given the usual scarcity of skilled townfolk with entrepreneurial zeal, experience, and capital support. Tourism is an economic

sector that typically leverages cross-sectoral exchange as seen in allied activities like agritourism, nature-based tourism, pilgrimage travel, cultural tourism and the long tail of essential services including retail, accommodation, and hospitality, among others. In many rural contexts, the attraction for urban dwellers to get out of the urban jungle and into the periphery has become increasingly pertinent given present-day pandemic concerns regarding health, well-being, and sanitation, as well as the longstanding pull of the rural idyll where lifestyle benefits are prized. Indeed, as Takanayagi (2010, p. 78) opines, “Rural landscapes nowadays are a commodity in the market”.

Research aims

The aim of this research is to explore the links between tourism and rural revitalization and the contributions that outsiders or immigrants might have. In the wider exploratory study, we focus on the Wakayama Prefecture, and in particular coastal tourism towns like Shirahama, as well as other townships, villages and hamlets of varying size located throughout. While the broad research endeavour extensively examines the macro and micro drivers of tourism in the prefecture, this short communication places express focus on the intersection between young entrepreneurs and the broader agenda to employ tourism as a vehicle for rural revitalization. In many rural situations, the endeavour of young entrepreneurs stands out in stark contrast to the staid and well-worn enterprises that dot the rural landscape. Very often, enterprises in situ are inadequate in servicing the needs of tourists and the questions as to how more young entrepreneurs with the requisite skills and enterprise can be attracted to rural areas is a query of pressing concern.

Research context

The Wakayama Prefecture is in the Kansai region of Japan, and on the largest island Honshu. Wakayama Prefecture

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borders Osaka prefecture to the north, and Mie and Nara prefecture to the northeast. At the end of 2021, Wakayama Prefecture had a population of just over 917,000 ranking it as the 40th prefecture by population size (Wakayama Prefectural Government, 2021). The Kii mountain range dominates the prefectural landscape and is said to be where the gods in Japanese mythology have resided. The sacred sites and pilgrimage routes throughout the prefecture, and the cultural landscapes that surround them, are defined by the Kii mountain range that stretches across three prefectures including Mie, Nara also. One of the prefecture's key tourism assets, the Kumano Kodo pilgrimage trail, was inscribed on the World Cultural Heritage List in 2004. Another of the prefecture's key attractions is Mount Koya, commonly referred to as Koyasan, where the headquarters of the Shingon sect of Japanese Buddhism resides. In terms of Wakayama Prefecture's economy, its main industries include iron and steel production, petroleum and coal products, and chemicals manufacture. Additionally, the fabrication of knitting machinery, photographic equipment and high-grade alcohol further supplements the prefecture's economic base (Ministry of Economy, Trade & Industry, 2011).

Concise literature review

This short communication is inspired by Susanne Klien's seminal work "Urban Migrants in Rural Japan: Between Agency and Anomie in a Post-growth Society" (Klien, 2020). Klien highlights the enormous attraction of the rural periphery for urbanites, seeking respite from the 'rat race' that tends to frame the key reasons urban to rural migration is desired. However, as Klien points out, the shift is most often far from seamless with the challenges often formidable rendering idealized conceptions almost immediately redundant when the reality of rurality and the associated constraints sinks in. Notwithstanding, the desire for a change of lifestyle and the emotional quest for improved quality of life and greater well-being outcomes appears to be a commensurate trade off.

If indeed, the youth are the future, in a context where an ageing population is an overriding occurrence, it makes sense then that enquiries into how the energy and vigor of younger cohorts can be nurtured and encouraged. As de Guzman et al (2020, p. 45) argue, youth entrepreneurship is "increasingly being positioned as important components of business development and revitalization because of the potential for younger residents to make unique contributions to the economic landscape and community". The examination of young entrepreneurs as agents for rural revitalization is vastly under researched, and the same applies in the examination of the role they play in rural tourism development.

When it comes to rural tourism, as the UNWTO (UN World Tourism Organization) (2017, p. 16) suggests, it "has been widely promoted as an effective source of income and employment, particularly in peripheral rural areas where traditional agrarian industries have declined". Furthermore, it is argued that "When considered against other economic development avenues such as manufacturing, rural tourism is less costly and easier to establish and it works well with existing rural enterprise models and can generate important secondary income to farms and other rural ventures" (UNWTO, 2017, p. 16). That said, the question of how to exploit the myriad opportunities that rural tourism provides remains a practical challenge considering the binding constraints that work to undermine the potential therein. One of the more prominent challenges faced is often the workings of inter-community networks and how these can make way for the inclusion and

encouragement of new arrivals (Onituska & Hoshino, 2018)

According to Rosenberger (2017), the opportunity for rural places as far as harnessing the potential of young in-migrants is concerned, is to tap into their desires to break the shackles of the neo-liberalism that pervades urban livelihoods. In using the example of young organic farmers, Rosenberger (2017, p. 27) argues that despite the binding constraints of trying to break into what are often closed societal contexts, they engage "through their perspectives of risk and uncertainty as occupational edgeworkers who transgress borders, crisscrossing binaries such as urban/rural, mind/body, nature/culture, past/future, morality/market, production/consumption, and global/local". In other words, their desire for a better life and healthier planet, and to play their part in addressing the ills of modernity, makes them ideal in-migrants for rural contexts.

The trajectory of rural tourism development in Japan appears to coincide with the peak of the Japanese economic boom in the 1990s where according to Chen et al (2018, p. 2896) 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". As Hashimoto et al (2021) argue:

Japan's rural villages are disappearing with outmigration and rapidly ageing populations. Many villages have witnessed a change in function, with the closing of industries and the decline of agriculture. Community services are dwindling as local governments struggle to provide for their residents, often forcing villages to merge with larger municipalities.

In a sense, Hashimoto et al, capture the general circumstances that exist in rural Japanese contexts. Tourism is increasingly seen as one means for overcoming what Hashimoto et al (2021) and Klien (2020) refer to as rapid demographic change and socio-economic restructuring, but whether tourism can indeed fulfil the hype and promise that is usually given to it, is another question altogether. In Hashimoto et al's (2021) view, it may be that the shrinking of rural communities is inevitable, regardless of attempts to revitalize it.

Moreover, some are critical about rural placemaking for tourism expansion, including Love (2013, p. 122) who argues that "initiatives to spin local character into economic renewal are not just last-ditch efforts to erect a service economy atop wrecked rural industries to lure metropolitan consumers". Love's (2013, p. 122) critical assessment of the rural revitalization agenda, to a considerable extent, goes against the grain of policy prescriptions "they are reflective of an ethos of neoliberal responsibility that underpins much sustainable development activity and threatens to leave behind places that cannot draw on their own energies to sustain themselves". This suggests that when it comes to the future of rural areas in Japan, structural policy conceptualisations must go beyond superficial remedies towards approaches that can help develop long-term adaptation strategies and avoid simply papering over the cracks.

Findings

The findings from the first stage of this research to examine the links between tourism, rural revitalization and young entrepreneurs holds multiple implications for policy makers, industry, and community stakeholders. In brief, given the ongoing nature of this work, key themes below are indicative of the unfolding situation in the Wakayama Prefecture. Some

of the main drivers for respondents include:

1. A desire to return 'home' and use their skills and experience gained in the larger urban centres toward assisting communities to deal with the challenges of a shrinking township. Very often, they are left to gain post-secondary education and develop their careers away from the local area. As they became older, and as their parents have aged, the sense is that they should return to help address the challenges of declining services and quality of life.
2. Many participants express wanting to move to a rural area because of the well-being and lifestyle benefits. This often includes the benefits they see accruing to them and their young families. The general sense is that quality-of-life benefits are far greater in rural areas than experienced in their previous urban living arrangements.
3. For many participants, the cost-of-living benefits of making the urban-rural shift was a major attraction. This included the low cost of housing as well the generally lower cost of living. Because employment opportunities tend to be limited, most respondents had in mind to leverage technical skills toward building their own enterprises.
4. Respondents mentioned that the sight of young entrepreneurs developing successful enterprises gave them additional motivation because it suggested that the conditions for building a successful business were present in the location. They also wanted to move to a rural location and live in a cluster with like-minded and similarly motivated people.

Conclusion

The extent to which tourism can help revitalize local areas and bring beneficial impacts to rural communities is, according to Chen et al (2018), often difficult to substantiate beyond one-off and anecdotal cases given the challenges of data availability and that revitalization is at the very least a medium to long-term endeavour. The broader question about why some rural areas decline, and why others manage to adapt, and flourish remains relevant because the successful application of measures will be dependent on numerous variables. As Li et al (2019, p. 141) found, contexts in which revitalization was common "tended to have a sufficient population density and connectivity, have a potential for utilizing the city regions knowledge spillovers and markets for rejuvenating their economies".

Within the constraints of this short communication, we propose that young entrepreneur in-migrants might be one key vehicle that can enable rural townships to adapt and flourish on account of the skills that they bring, as well as the desire to relocate and settle long-term in their chosen rural locale. Indeed, as Klien (2019, p. 76) points out, "The palpable rise in urban youth residing in rural areas has resulted in a partial shift in perspectives on and thinking about what rural areas have to offer". This signals that for tourism to be leveraged as a tool for rural revitalization, the answer might lie in a policy framework that can convince skilled young entrepreneurs that a shift to the rural fringe can have both business, professional and personal advantages. This is particularly pertinent at a time where well-being, health and lifestyle drivers have become ever more prominent, and where the shift to the rural can connote quality-of-life enhancement.

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