



2022 TOP 100 GOOD PRACTICE STORY

Title of the Story: Sustainable Conservation and Utilization of the more than a thousand years old Grasslands to Conserve the Aso Landscape and improve tourism

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Country: Japan

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Submission category: *(Please check one of the boxes that indicates the focus of your story)*

Please find detailed information for the categories below in the Top 100 training module 'Good Practice Story'.

- Governance, Reset & Recovery 観光の管理、回復と復興（コロナ禍での）
- Nature & Scenery 自然と景観
- Environment & Climate 環境と気候変動対応
- Culture & Tradition 文化と伝統
- Thriving Communities コミュニティの活性化
- Business & Marketing ビジネスとマーケティング

Find detailed instructions for submitting good practices in the Top 100 training module "Good Practice Story".

Should you have any questions on your submission please refer to our FAQ page or contact top100@greendestinations.org





DESCRIBE YOUR GOOD PRACTICE STORY

Address each aspect of your good practice story in the different sections being specific including relevant quantitative and qualitative information.

Issues faced 直面した課題（解決すべき課題は何でしたか？）

Aso City, located in the center of Kyushu, is often symbolized by its active volcano and a grassland landscape nurtured by the symbiosis between nature and people. It is also designated as a national park, a UNESCO World Geopark, and a World Agricultural Heritage site. The Aso grasslands, are the largest in Japan, covering an area of about 22,000 hectares, and according to soil analysis results, is a "cultural heritage" that has been handed down through the symbiotic relationship between people and nature for about 13,000 years.

However, according to the "Aso Grassland Maintenance and Restoration Basic Survey" conducted in FY2021, grassland decreased by 341 ha over the past five years, while forest land increased by 259 ha. The conversion of grassland to forest land has been progressing rapidly. In addition, when looking at the prospects (according to the same survey) for the continuation of activities by rural communities, which are indispensable for the maintenance of grasslands, the percentage of respondents who "expect to continue their activities for 10 years or more" decreased significantly from 38% in the previous survey conducted five years ago to 2.6%. The "already difficult or discontinued" and "for a few years" categories accounted for a total of 22% of the respondents, indicating that sustainable grassland maintenance is facing difficulties. In addition, the number of grazing animals, which is indispensable for maintaining the grassland landscape of Aso, decreased significantly by 1,025 (about 1.7% of the total number of grazing animals) from the previous survey conducted five years ago. The number of grazing animals decreased significantly by 1,025 (about 1.7% of the total number of grazing animals) since the previous survey five years ago.

One of the issues making it difficult to maintain the grasslands was the fact that it had become difficult to sustain the farming activities that had been conducted on the grasslands, such as grazing and grass harvesting, as a business. As a result, local residents have been moving away from grassland agriculture, resulting in an aging and depopulated population and a lack of skilled farmers. In addition, concerns about infectious disease transmission to cattle and horses grazing on the grasslands and the theft of rare plants have restricted the entry of people other than those concerned, limiting the extent to which the grasslands can be conserved and utilized.

On the other hand, the grassland landscape of Aso is also a unique and indispensable resource for tourism, highly valued worldwide. The top three tourism resources in the Aso region on TripAdvisor, a word-of-mouth travel site, are "Daikanbo," "Kusasenrigahama," and "Milk Road," all of which are tourism resources that are made possible by the grassland landscape.

A new sustainable model was needed to preserve and utilize the "grasslands" that are the symbolic landscape of Aso, as well as the precious natural and cultural resources nurtured there, in a





sustainable manner for tourism, in addition to traditional agriculture, and to pass them on to the next generation.

Methods, steps and tools applied 対策として取り入れた手法、ステップ、ツールなど（どの様にグッドプラクティスが実行されましたか？）

Sharing the concept, current situation and issues.

The GSTC (Global Sustainable Tourism Council) training program has been developed for the locals, municipal offices, NPOs, public interest foundations, tourism related businesses that include accommodation, experience oriented activity companies, transportation companies, food and beverage companies as well as tourism associations. The aim was, besides the general informational process, to bring interested parties to the practical side, creating onsite reflections on how to develop and support sustainable tourism..

This enabled the concerned parties to work together based on the four sections of the GSTC: sustainable management, socio-economics, cultural development and environmental sustainability. PDCA (plan-do-check-act) cycle and established the foundation for promoting activities.

The above-mentioned parties discussed and formulated guidelines for grasslands' conservation and utilization. The guideline sets forth four items: "Our Philosophy," "Our Principles of Action," "Our Rules and Compliance," and "Points to Keep in Mind in Interpretation," to ensure that the parties concerned share the direction they are aiming for in the medium to long term, and to clarify the level of action to be taken in day to day farming, sightseeing, etc. The action level of the grassland conservation and utilization was also clarified.

Agriculture combined with Tourism as a preservation system: an applied example.

One of the typical activities in Aso's grassland culture is the "Kusadomari," where people stay in temporary conical huts made of grass and bamboo in the grasslands. In the period before the spread of automobile transportation (~1960's), time and effort to travel between the villages at the foot of the mountains and the grasslands on top of the mountains was resource consuming. The people of Aso created the Kusadomari huts, to overnight in the grasslands when bringing their cattle for grazing or when gathering grass. However, with the spread of automobile transportation and the construction of roads, this practice has declined, and it has barely been handed down from farmers in their 70s and older. From a modern perspective, this historical Kusadomari is a cutting-edge style of stay that is 100% biodegradable, "leaves no trace" and thus has a low environmental impact. It is also part of the unique Aso grassland traditional culture. As it was decided that farmers and touristic businesses would work together to preserve and utilize the grasslands. In strict compliance with the above guidelines,





and with special permissions, tourists have then entered the grasslands, assembled three Kusadomari buildings under the guidance of farmers, and spent time in the grasslands. Going forward, we will continue to promote the preservation and utilization of grassland culture through agriculture combined with tourism, with the Kusadomari activity at its core.

In parallel with the above efforts, a "Make our town an entirely sustainable place to stay" plan was formulated based on discussions among the parties concerned. Six lodging facilities were renovated to make them more energy-efficient and environmentally friendly, and to enable longer stays. In the field of transportation, small buses were operated on a trial basis to tour sightseeing spots that had been difficult to access by public transportation. Surveys and studies were conducted to reduce the use of private cars and improve customer convenience. For the activities part, in order to conserve and utilize grasslands in the tourism sector in compliance with the above guidelines, the "Aso Sustainable Travel 15 Campaign" was launched. The "Selected Aso Caldera Tour Campaign" was held to demonstrate the utilization of grasslands in the tourism sector.

Key success factors 成功の主要因（その課題解決のために何が支援となりましたか？）

Stakeholders and Partners

Receiving advice and guidance from domestic and international expert organizations (Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, Ministry of the Environment, GSTC, Regional Tourism Research Institutes, etc. and experts in their respective fields), various local stakeholders (Aso Natural Environment Office, Kumamoto Prefecture, Aso City, Aso Regional Promotion Design Center, Aso Greenstock Foundation, NPO Aso Rural Space Museum, etc.) in association with the **Aso Rural Space Museum**, ranching cooperatives, guesthouse associations, tourism associations, activity providers, etc.; were successful in improving the cooperative investigation based on the PDCA cycle.

The main reason for the success of this project was that it was implemented and improved with its PDCA cycle. In particular, the Aso Caldera Tourism Promotion Council, a cross-sectional organization established in 2020 by local stakeholders, served as a powerful driving force for discussions and actions that transcended traditional barriers such as agriculture, tourism, and the environment.

Other elements essential to the project

The multilayered support from the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (Japan Tourism Agency) and the Ministry of the Environment in terms of funding, know-how, and specialized human resources related to sustainable tourism and national parks was a major support for the promotion of this project. In particular, the GSTC has been re-edited into a form that is easier to understand and implement. The JSTS-D (Japan Sustainable Tourism Standard for Destinations), or





Japanese version of the GSTC, served as a bible for the consideration and formulation of various action plans.

Lessons learned 得られた知見（グッドプラクティスを実行中、どの様な課題に直面し、どの様に乗り越えましたか？）

All the concerned people and parties.

While the words "sustainable" and "SDGs" were often heard, what people understood from these words varied from person to person. More specifically, while the meaning of natural environment protection was very present, a more diluted image of management, culture, and economic activities was prevalent and everybody did not perceive them as effective personal matters.

Besides the GSTC training, the comprehension of today's situation based on the JSTS- D, there has been a deepening of the understanding of what sustainability stands for. The people concerned have begun to consider whether they are effectively "sustainable" in their own lives and business development based on the four indicators of the GSTC. In particular, awareness is being raised in lodging facilities and restaurants, which consume large amounts of energy and other resources.

People concerned with grassland grazing and rare flora and fauna protection

Whilst some people thought that "preservation and protection" and "utilization" of the grasslands were incompatible, some people did agree that both were effectively compatible. More specifically, some concerned people were reluctant to utilize tourism as a method for grassland conservation.

Although there are still some reluctant parties involved, many parties understand and are taking action toward efforts to balance "conservation and protection" and "utilization. Specifically, the aforementioned guidelines have been established, and based on these guidelines, travelers are allowed to enter the grasslands and conduct activities in order to conserve and utilize the grasslands. Through these efforts, we will further promote understanding of the compatibility of "conservation and protection" and "utilization" of grasslands by making it "visible" in concrete terms.

Some stakeholders felt guilty about raising appropriate revenue in a sustainable manner, rather than the idea of balancing "volunteer" and "business" activities. More specifically, some stakeholders were hesitant to pay appropriate compensation to farmers (grassland keepers), who are the bearers of grassland culture, for their activities on the grasslands.

While paying the utmost respect to the "aspirations" of the volunteers, we are working to introduce a system that can be economically viable as a business for sustainable use of grasslands. Specifically,





they are working to create a system in which activities such as thatch picking by farmers in grasslands and the creation of "grass nights" using cut thatch are reevaluated from the perspective of sustainable tourism and paid for in a way that is recognized as valuable by target tourists. This initiative is still limited due to the Corona disaster, but will be introduced as restrictions on traveler visits are resolved.

Results, achievements and recognitions 成果や達成したこと、表彰など（グッドプラクティスの質的・量的な成果はどの様なものでしたか？表彰や受賞されたものはありますか？）

In order to conserve and utilize grasslands sustainably through "agriculture x tourism," guidelines have been established for all parties concerned to follow. The guidelines are now in operation.

In 6 pastures (1,163 ha) out of 66 pastures (12,790 ha) in Aso City, conservation and utilization of grasslands through "agriculture x tourism" is being promoted.

346 persons participated in the activity of using and preserving the grasslands through "agriculture x tourism" as described above and 2,479,000 yen was collected as experience fees despite the impact of the corona disaster. Of the experience fees, 300,000 yen was paid to the pastoral cooperative as a grassland conservation fee to be used for grassland conservation activities. In addition, a total of 88 people were paid as activity guides in relation to the implementation of activities and received appropriate remuneration.

Six lodging facilities in the region have been upgraded with energy-saving, low-environmental-impact equipment and renovated for longer stays. The plan is to continue to expand the project in 2022 and beyond.

A total of 1,058 people used the bus service on a trial basis to visit sightseeing spots that had not previously been served by public transportation, and the service had the effect of reducing the number of people using private cars.

Awards

October 2008: Aso-Kujyu Tourism Region recognized based on the Tourism Region Development Law

May 2013: Recognized as a World Agricultural Heritage Site

September 2013: Designation as a special zone for regional revitalization

September 2014: Recognized as a Global Geopark

December 2014: Awarded "Special Prize" at the Ecotourism Grand Prix by the Ministry of the Environment





October 2017: Selected as an Important Cultural Landscape of Japan

February 2018: Ecotourism Grand Prize "Excellence Award" by Ministry of the Environment

June 2019: Japan Tourism Agency consent to the Regional Interpreter Guide Training Plan based on the Interpreter Guide Law

July 2019: Approval of the overall concept based on the Ecotourism Promotion Act

August 2020: Approval of regional plan based on the Cultural Tourism Promotion Act

October 2021: Selected as one of the 100 most sustainable tourism destinations in the world

Additional references 追加の参考資料（参考資料のリンク、ダウンロード可能な写真やビデオのご提供

Provide links to further information. Pictures and videos should be available for download either from YouTube, Vimeo or other Cloud-based (Google/ One Drive) download URL (not WeTransfer).

Aso Grassland Restoration Concept (Phase 3)

Aso Grassland Maintenance and Restoration Basic Survey 2021

Aso Grassland Conservation Support System Project Completion Report 2021

Report on GSTC-accredited training program

Guidelines for the Conservation and Utilization of Grasslands

Report on the Aso Tourism Creation Project for transmitting a Thousand-Year-Old Grassland Culture to the Next Generation

Aso Uchimaki Hot Springs Restoration "Plan for Making the Whole Town a Sustainable Staying Place

Aso Sightseeing Tour Bus Operation Demonstration Project Implementation Report

Challenge! Selected! Aso Sustainable Travel 15 Demonstration Project Implementation Report

Aso Caldera Tourism Promotion Council General Meeting

Assessment Report 2021 based on the Japanese Sustainable Tourism Guidelines

The results of acceptance of tourism experience contents utilizing grasslands 2021

Materials for the selection of the 100 most sustainable tourism destinations in the world (2021)

