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Tourism as an Innovation and its diffusion among rural destinations

- A Case study in Tsurui village -

（イノベーションとしての観光と農村地域への普及：鶴居村の事例）

In the present state of tourism development when facing difficulties in tight and close communities like rural areas, the benefits that tourism development strategies can bring to residents in these areas are minimized and, sometimes, nonexistent. The involvement of residents in tourism has been seen as a pillar to sustainable development in tourism. However, most cases show more involvement of those with the most to gain from this. One of the reasons for this is a lack of awareness and knowledge among residents about tourism. Another reason is a lack of awareness and knowledge from tourism development entities about the unexpected “wisdom” of residents. Aiming to reach those residents who might have “wisdom” to share about tourism but do not have the confidence to say it proves to be a difficult task, especially considering the different types of tourism that residents might have experienced. While some types of tourism can be perceived as beneficial in the residents’ eyes, others do not. Thus, tourism developers must be conscious and address the specific nature of the tourism residents have knowledge about and the type of tourism they (tourism developers) aim to develop. Developers could take a known example of tourism development that residents have accepted to identify the perception change process residents underwent before accepting such new developments. This research aims to consider such types of tourism development as innovations for the area where it has been developed. It proposes using Diffusion of Innovation’s innovation-decision process regarding a tourism innovation at a local community in a rural area to track down residents’ perception change patterns. Primarily, it develops and theorizes the author’s Level of Adoption Classification (LOAC) as a tool that can assist in the classification and identification of residents’ adoption levels and maintenance of a tourism innovation. This research applied the Diffusion of Innovation theory to track down the perception change of residents in Tsurui Village, Hokkaido, Japan.

The methodology used for this research is based on an interpretive paradigm since it is especially suitable to analyze and understand participants' perceptions and maintains awareness of the researcher's own perceptions. It focuses on a case study in Tsurui Village, Hokkaido, Japan, where a tourism-related innovation, Heart'n Tree (hereafter H'nT), a farm-inn and restaurant, has been able to position itself as a tourism promoter and residents have well accepted it. Because of the low number of mixed-method research in tourism, this study follows a sequential mixed method, where acquiring information through participatory observation and surveys (in Japanese) is pivotal for creating, modifying, and stratifying sampling necessary for the interviews (in Japanese)—the surveys aimed to identify respondents' past and present experience with tourism and the innovation, H'nT. In addition, it was used to create the clusters of the LOAC groups based on respondents' number of visits to the innovation and the relationship they have with their chosen visit companions. The interviews were then done with the best representative of each of the LOAC groups, and focused on respondents' general knowledge and perception of tourism in the village, their innovation-decision process, and their final perception post-innovation-decision process. The obtained data was then translated into English for the following stages. The analysis of the quantitative data was done with a descriptive analysis of the survey, followed by the most relevant correlations found among the factors of the survey. For the qualitative data, Thematic analysis was used to identify, determine, and specify themes appearing in the interviews. The interpretation and discussion of both sets of data were then integrated when relevance was seen; information seen as pertinent obtained from participatory observation was added to help interpret or better understand some results.

The key findings of this research revolve around the LOAC tool. First, since the relationship with companions and the relationship with the innovation proved to correlate, this supports using the implementation level and depth of the innovation as a starting point to segment residents. Second, different perceptions regarding government measures for tourism development were witnessed among the LOAC groups. Early Rejectors favored the residents, Supporters favored measures that benefit both hosts and guests, Adopters favored the guests and Acceptors refrained from favoring any side. Third, the innovation-decision process of following the knowledge assimilation and behavioral change throughout the stages effectively tracked these changes and involved respondents in introspection of their perceptions. Fourth, the perception of the tourism-entrepreneurship as a mere entrepreneurship decreased among all LOAC groups almost steadily throughout the process. At the same time, their awareness of it as an innovation increased, stabilizing later on with a more balanced view at the end. The implications of these findings can help other researchers understand the tourism-innovation effect on host communities and their view of tourism, giving them an idea of how residents can be segmented based on their perception change. It can also aid practitioners in drawing a more inclusive strategic plan for tourism development by giving them a view of the different levels of awareness and knowledge of tourism among the residents so that all opinions can be heard objectively.