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Yoichi event spreads strategies for rural revitalization

Experts discuss keys, challenges to Hokkaido's success in tourism

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The Hokkaido town of Yoichi, historically known for whisky and rapidly also gaining recognition as a wine-producing area, was the venue for the fifth annual event to share experiences about revitalizing rural economies through effectively using existing resources. The program of Sept. 28, the first day of the two-day event, was held at the town's community center. The event was co-hosted by The Japan Times' Sustainable Japan Network and the town.

In the first panel session, moderated by Yuto Yoshida, representative director of Glocal Government Relationz and former mayor of Yokosuka, three panelists talked about the keys and challenges to Hokkaido's success in tourism.

Yoichi Mayor Keisuke Saito said he came to realize the good qualities of the area because of his time spent outside the country since his teenage years. Since taking office, he has promoted a strategy to boost the local economy by communicating its

charms and focusing on industries with high potential. Thanks to these efforts, the town has steadily raised its profile over the last several years.

He said the most difficult part is gaining the understanding of the townspeople. "Focusing on one area can attract criticism, but if the benefits outweigh the criticism, then the strategy is the right one. We focus on the wine industry because it's a broad-based industry with links to food and drink, agriculture and so on." The strategy employs clear directions and methods, such as taking a Burgundian style characterized by a cluster of small wineries rather than a few giant ones, and marketing focused on gastronomies rather than spending a fortune on mass-marketing.

Kenya Katayama, mayor of the Hokkaido town of Niseko, said the town's beautiful scenic environment has been its greatest resource. Niseko, famous for its powder snow in winter, has been successful in revitalizing tourism based on its residents' autonomy.

"For the local government to support the tourism industry, it is necessary to explain to the townspeople how the money generated by tourism contributes to the community," he said.

To give local people greater benefits, he proposed a two-tier price system combined with the use of a community



Participants at the first panel session
TAKEO OHTA

currency to let them get discounts at local stores. He also said the era of competition between regions is over and each region should cooperate with its neighbors in various ways, such as improving infrastructure and securing human resources.

Makiko Kamori, who leads the business development division of the Rusutsu Resort, said tourism is a tool that benefits the community. "The boost to tourism has significant spillover economic effects on transportation, food and drink, agriculture and many other sectors," she said. She also pointed out that profits from tourism can be spent on preserving the local culture and nature.

To attract tourists throughout the year and stabilize revenue, she said, it is important to attract inbound tourists and school trips because domestic travel generally is limited to holiday seasons.

"One of the things we realized recently through our Rusutsu Report Nursery School is the market need for early childhood education in a rural environment, which could be a new potential," she said.

Famed farm, sea products create potential for gastronomy tourism

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The second panel session, moderated by Kosuke Motani, the chief senior economist at the Japan Research Institute Ltd. and an adviser to The Japan Times' Sustainable Japan Network, focused on the possibility of gastronomy tourism in Hokkaido.

Takahiko Soga, who runs a winery and vineyard called Domaine Takahiko in the hilly area east of the town's center, was born the second son of a vintner in Nagano Prefecture. He first came to Yoichi looking for the ideal place and climate to grow pinot noir, a grape variety native to the Burgundy region of France that is generally used to make red wine.

"My winery was the first to be established in 36 years since Yoichi became home to the first one," he said. Many other winemakers followed suit, and small new wineries have popped up in Yoichi ever since. "There will be close to 30 wineries in our town next year, each one produc-

ing 10,000 to 20,000 bottles," he said, adding that they are attempting to create a regional taste. With the wine culture thus nurtured by local people, Yoichi is becoming known as a wine-producing town.

Ayumi Ito, the president and producer of Creative Office Cue Co. Ltd., established the entertainment company in Sapporo in 1992.

"When I started to spend half of my time in Tokyo in 2004, I came to realize how fresh the air in Hokkaido is and how tasty the produce of Hokkaido is," she said.

The discovery led to the series of three movies the company later created that told stories of a bakery, a winery and a cheese producer, all using products of Hokkaido, to promote the region and its rich food culture.

The third in the series, "Kita no Shokukei" ("Northern Food Story"), a documentary on a cheese maker, was nominated in the Culinary Zinema section of the 72nd San Sebastian Festival this year. "We are launching our own film festival, titled Hokkaido Food Film Festival, to be held in November, with an aim to create a platform that promotes the charms of Hokkaido's food," she said.

Nozomi Onishi, the vice president of Tsuruga Hold-



Panelists at the second panel session
TAKEO OHTA

ings, which operates more than a dozen resort facilities in Hokkaido, said there are many stories to tell and traditions to preserve in Hokkaido. That is why most of the facilities owned by the company are renovated buildings and some serve meals made from produce grown within a 50-mile radius.

The company has also launched farms to grow its own products. At Lake Toya Tsuruga Resort Hikari no Uta, as many as 850 raspberry, blueberry, cranberry and other fruit bushes were planted this year. She said the farm, situated at the foot of the Showa Shinzan volcano, is blessed with rich soil suitable for growing berries. "We have another farm in the town of Tsubetsu where we grow 600 kinds of vegetables," Onishi said.

About a quarter of the guests who visit Tsuruga's resort facilities are foreigners, and Onishi looks forward to offering more gastronomic experiences that can only be enjoyed in Hokkaido.



Creating repeat visitors

KOSUKE MOTANI
SENIOR RESEARCHER AT THE JAPAN RESEARCH INSTITUTE



The keynote speech given by Kosuke Motani focused on the potential for promoting tourism in Japan's rural areas, and important points to consider: "Inbound

tourism is expected to become an ¥8 trillion (\$55 billion) market this year, and it will continue to grow," Motani said. But he also warned that it can easily fluctuate due to factors such as natural disasters, pandemics and international conflicts. "The tourism sector needs to survive the bad times by relying on the cash accumulated during the good times," he said, adding that the way to secure high profits is to increase sales per person by focusing on those who are enthusiastic and well-off.

He said rural depopulation will not hin-

der that strategy. "This is entirely possible and sustainable to do in small communities if they can make high-value products locally." By "products" he means not just food and drink, but also accommodation, activities, places to visit — everything that one can experience in a community. He added that it is also important to try to understand which of an area's charms actually attract visitors rather than just features that locals want to promote. Another key factor for success in tourism is to increase repeat visitors. "I believe that the biggest motivation for a person to revisit a place is a desire to reexperience an encounter," he said. An inspirational, one-of-a-kind experience — whether involving a person or a place — gives a person a powerful reason to come again. As for increasing the number of long-term guests, Motani emphasized the need for places where they can live like locals do, blending in with the community.

Though depopulation and aging are the general trend in rural areas across the country, Motani said populations are growing in places that are successful in making such efforts and in circulating profits from tourism within the community.

A unique sense of place

HIROTO MURAI
YOICHI SAGRA CHEF AND OWNER



Hiroto Murai opened Yoichi Sagra, an Italian inn in Yoichi, in 2017. "While I was running a restaurant in Sapporo for 10 years before I moved to Yoichi, I had opportunities

to get to know many products and their source areas," he said.

Although many of the products he used were from Hokkaido, they still needed to be packaged and delivered, which took time. "That's why I decided to move to a place where things I use in my work are produced," he said.

However, he was faced with the difficulty of giving people a clear reason to visit the relatively remote town — until he realized that the location itself was the draw for Yoichi Sagra. "If you are just looking for good food, you can find it in any

city. But imagine that you've come all the way here, enjoying the scenery. And you find that scenery re-created on the plate using local produce.

That's the kind of experience that gives meaning to traveling," he said, confident in his ability to offer his guests an inimitable trip through the gastronomic experience he provides. "To make your business successful in a rural town, you need to have a strong individuality and uniqueness and present it well."

He also said that in Yoichi he can come face to face with customers in a way that was not possible in bustling Sapporo.

As one of the opportunities for he and his guests to engage in deeper interactions with each other and the community, he is planning a winery tour next year.

"I want to make it a tour that will bring back my guests every year as an opportunity to update ourselves," he said, showing a sense of mission to dig deeper into the community and disseminate its riches.

Yoichi Sagra
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Students research ideas

At the end of the event, two groups of students from Hokkaido Yoichi Koshi High School gave a presentation about their internship experience. One talked about their visits to a winery, a farm and a construction company in Yoichi and what they learned about the challenges and efforts of each. Based on the findings, the students will continue their research to generate ideas to develop new products that embody the charms of Yoichi.

The other group visited a hot spring, the tourism bureau, the town hall, a museum and a supermarket to understand what needs to be done to better promote the town as a tourism destination. As a first step for communicating the town's appeal, the group has started the process of making a tourist map in English.



A study tour of Yoichi: Fine food and drink, and a rich history

At the end of the first day of the event, a networking dinner was held at the *ryokan* Kakuto Tokushimaya, located right in front of Yoichi Station, and enjoyed a wide variety of food made largely from local agricultural and marine products, as well as wine provided by Domaine Takahiko.

On the second day, the participants took a tour to Domaine Takahiko's winery and vineyard Domaine Takahiko and the Nitōri Sightseeing Orchard, where they picked organically grown apples in the morning. They had lunch at a newly opened restaurant called Wine and Pig, which serves a wide selection of wine and Yoichi's premium Kitajima pork.

In the afternoon, the group visited the Yoichi Fisheries Museum, which exhibits excavated and preserved items that tell the history and folk culture of Yoichi, and Nikka Whisky's Yoichi Distillery, where they learned about the history of the 90-year-old distillery while enjoying tasting different kinds of whisky.

