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Ecotourism in Yakushima: Reflections in the rainy season

The island of Yakushima is famous for its endemic cedar species called 'yakusugi' many of which are over one thousand years old. Furthermore, due to its geographical location as well as its mountainous topography (which peaks at some 2,000m above sea level) the island hosts a great diversity of vegetation. This consists of sub-tropical deciduous forests in Yakushima's lower regions which is then succeeded by coniferous forests at higher altitudes before finally giving way to alpine flora on the mountain peaks. Due to the richness of its natural environment, Yakushima became one of UNESCO's World Heritage sites in 1993. Another unique aspect to Yakushima is the fact that the waters around the island host the greatest variety of fish species to be found in Japan. It is estimated that the diversity and uncommon natural features of Yakushima attract as many as 150,000 - 200,000 tourists to the island per year.

With the increasing number of tourists to the island, however, serious problems are arising such as environmental destruction resulting from the construction of tourist facilities, an increase in trash left by tourists, and deteriorating water quality due to increases in discharges from tourist facilities. Residents of Yakushima have come to feel that, while tourism could be encouraged as the island's major industry, the unique nature of the island should never be spoilt by tourism development. Consequently, the concept of 'ecotourism' was introduced for the purpose of conserving Yakushima's precious natural resources while aiming at maintaining and improving the quality of life of people on the island.

Ordinary tourism can be described, if rather roughly, as an act of reaching a so-called 'tourist spot', appreciating a particular landscape or architectural feature, buying some souvenirs and then rushing away home or on to the next spot. This kind of tourism results in a situation where the tourist has been to a certain place and bought certain things there, but often nothing more. By contrast, it can be said that eco-tourism aims at combining tourism and nature conservation by considering the sustainability of the local environment and culture, and appreciating and respecting both more deeply than conventional tourism.

It is said that ecotourism started in Costa Rica in Central America, where farmers around protected conservation areas are trying to improve their standards of living by increasing local employment opportunities while at the same time maintaining local natural resources in a sustainable manner. Ecotourism can provide an important pointer for balancing development and conservation in developing countries, as well as for the revitalisation of remote, underpopulated areas in Japan.

However, in talking to many people in Yakushima and actually taking part in the ecotour program myself to walk around the yakusugi forest, I thought that, in order to start off and maintain ecotourism successfully, no doubt the existence of 'natural resources' is crucial as an attraction for tourists but not sufficient by itself. What is needed in addition for the success of ecotourism is, in my opinion, the establishment of 'soft' factors, such as well-prepared / equipped tour-hosting bodies, careful consideration of the contents of the ecotour programs, certification, improved quality of tour guides, and so on.

(Reported by KOTO in Yakushima)



Misty Yakusugi forest covered with moss



**Broad-leaved sub tropical forest in
Yakushima Island**