

From the frontline of environmental education <Part 3>

Whole Earth Nature School

Ecotourism

Ecotourism is a coined word, combining the words ecology and tourism. There is no established uniform definition of ecotourism, and it is used differently depending on the standpoints of people and countries. This is because areas and individuals places differ depending on the way they are involved in ecotourism and their stance. There are also different objectives for promoting ecotourism which affect the definition. Whatever the ultimate definition is, as the word starts with “eco”, ecotourism is not mere tourism. Ecological elements such as natural resources are the core of ecotourism, and conservation of natural resources and sustainable use, form an important basis.

Whole Earth Nature School and Ecotourism

Whole Earth Nature School (WENS) is a company based in Fujinomiya City. It aims to restore the Japanese style view of nature by demonstrating ways of life where people, nature and locales live in harmony, through offering various nature experience programs and organizing environmental education activities targeting corporates. The main activities include ecotours such as Mt. Fuji climbing and trekking around the crater, cave exploration, making the most of our location at the foothill of Mt. Fuji with its vast natural area. The school also offers programs to reflect on the usual way of living and lifestyle through farming work with a view to improving lifestyles. WENS' activities are run and sustained by various revenues including guiding fees for ecotours.

Roles of Interpreters (Guides)

Ecotours are accompanied by a guide called the “interpreter”. WENS have 30 plus interpreters and this makes the ecotours and nature experiences more fun and fruitful. Interpreters' explanations make participants notice things which they would not otherwise, and helps deepen their understanding of what they see, thus improving the quality of ecotours. Their motto is that one of the most important roles of the interpreters is to “communicate what one cannot see through what one can see.” For example, communicate the amazing facts

about evolution of animals using owl's feathers, or make participants realize the intricate colors that are unique to Japanese culture, using a large variety of fallen leaves. For this to be successful, it is necessary to develop practical yet attractive teaching materials. The interpreters are also required to have skills to create the right atmosphere and sense of “place” that will help communicate messages. Another important work of the interpreters is relationship building with host farmers at farming experience events.

Ecotours and Environmental Education

Looking at ecotours and nature experiences as a business, by offering high quality content that can conjure up deep emotion, one can ensure continued revenue. On the other hand, if one looks at ecotours from the view point of environmental education, enjoying the tour experiences alone is not sufficient. Additional emphasis is placed on realization and awareness raising through these experiences, and it is expected that ecotours will also trigger changes in actions due to the new awareness of participants.

WENS incorporates actual nature conservation activities within their ecotours, so that participants will not only be made aware of the conservation issues but will link the awareness to actual actions. For instance, there are local actions to protect the natural environment in the area by looking after bamboo woodlands and conserving satoyama (mountain villages) as volunteer activities. As for agricultural experience, with cooperation from local farmers, WENS offers rice planting, weeding, rice cultivation experiences, as well as craft classes using straw after harvest. Offering the sequence of farming activities, creating a “story line” helps secure repeaters.

Whether business oriented or environmental education oriented, an important common aspect of ecotours is to continuously improve quality of experiences, even if the objectives are different. This quality of experience is something that will lead to sustainability of activities.



Whole Earth Nature School's Fujinomiya
main school



Making education materials with a variety
of fallen leaves



Site for farming experience and
volunteering