Original Paper

Cross-Cultural Homestay and Challenges to Accept Foreign Settlements in Rural Areas of Japanese Biosphere Reserves; Case of Shiramine Village in Mount Hakusan Biosphere Reserve

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Abstract

We have conducted the Winter and Summer Homestay activities for foreign students inside the rural areas of Mount Hakusan Biosphere Reserve, to evaluate how well local villagers were ready to accept foreigners in their communities. We found a big issue, as no locals were willing to accept students for long homestay. Among the tentative list of 15, only 6 host houses with 18 family members agreed to accept students. We have found that before the homestay activities all villagers were very concerned about the foreigners' behavior and felt very alerted, but after the homestay program, most of them replied (86%) that they were less concerned, and homestay helped them to raise awareness towards foreigners' behaviors. We have found that villagers are afraid of foreigners' behavior more and because for many years the region was isolated from foreigners' influx, some non-verbal communication can be mistakenly interpreted like "inappropriate" or "rude" actions. This kind of homestay program, was conducted for the first time in the rural area of Mount Hakusan Biosphere Reserve, and we found that real-life experience with foreigners as homestay programs reduced the sense of alertness and raise the awareness towards the foreigners' behavior.

Keywords

Behavior, Biosphere Reserve, Community-Service, Foreign students, Volunteering

1. Introduction

UNESCO's Man and Biosphere Program (MAB), since 1970th, has designated the areas with significant conservational importance as Biosphere Reserves (BRs). BRs pursue the regional sustainable development together with the preservation of local biological and cultural diversities (UNESCO, 2019). As for 2018, Japan has nine BRs, and most of them are situated in the mountainous

regions. Remote geographical locations, specific climate conditions, economical and demographical changings in those regions have created the serious social problems for the last few decades. The rapid Japanese industrialization in 1960th, and shift to urban-based economic governance, resulted in land use decline, field abandonment in the rural areas and outflow to big cities caused the depopulation issues (Fukamachi et al., 2001; Kamada & Nakagoshi, 1997; Feldhoff, 2013). Most of the young Japanese people prefer to move to nearby cities to continue their studies and career. Even though, that BRs considered as the model regions for the sustainable development (Ishwaran et al., 2008), with socio-demographical problems Japanese BRs are facing big challenges to continue sustainable development. To deal with depopulation and labor shortage, Japanese government is trying to implement new regulations to attract more foreigners (Asia review, 2018). According to Ministry of Internal Affairs the population of foreign residents in Japan, since 2014, grew on 24.6% and most of them come as students or "technical intern trainers" in their 20s and 30s (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, December 2018). Rural areas have also recorded the increased number of foreign and growth in foreign residents can be a good opportunity to keep the number of residents from dropping further. However, local people are very skeptical to accept the foreign settlements and they feel very alerted to accept foreign students even for a short stay. The questions like what make local people to feel so much alerted and be against internalization and diversity, still remain unclear.

To attract younger generations and foreigners to live or work in the rural, several studies already have conducted with educational fieldtrip activities, and it was found that local villagers were not ready to accept the foreigners due to the cultural and language differences and very often, they tried to avoid any contact with them (Kowner, 2002). We have observed in our previous studies, that sometimes, the simple actions by the foreigners were accepted very offensive by locals. In contrast, some students accepted the simple communicational words or actions by the locals as the discrimination, and extra hospitality was felt as the excessive burden for the foreigners (Mammadova, 2018). Other studies showed, that values evaluated by the foreign students, were completely contradicting with the opinions of local people. For example, snow was evaluated as the most valuable resource that can sustain all the traditional lifestyle, whereas local villagers evaluated the snow as the biggest obstacle that makes their life very difficult (Mammadova, 2017). Surprisingly, miscommunication issues were observed not only with foreigners but also with Japanese students. During the fieldtrip activities, in rural areas Japanese students were not aware about the local traditions and issues (Seguchi et al., 2015), and very often felt themselves as foreigners in the rural communities. Communication abilities was very low as both sides did not know how to communicate with each other's and students were not able to easily adapt to the region.

Japanese Biosphere Reserves in rural areas, which are aimed to develop local economies while sustaining natural resources, urgently need to balance the gap between the decreasing number of residents and increasing number of leftover workplaces. The flow of foreign residents into the remote areas are expecting to fill that gap and in this study we decided to make the first study to evaluate the

readiness and challenges of the local people, to receive foreign settlements. We decided to organize homestay program with community service activities inside the houses of local people, where students will provide the volunteering activities to help with daily life activities of the villagers. Our hypothesis, were that after the homestay activities local villagers will feel less alerted towards the foreigners. The host families will have the opportunity to communicate with foreign students and learn about the foreign culture. This kind of communications can create the new values inside the villagers, and they would start to reconsidering the perceptions towards the foreigners and have some reflections on their own lifestyle. After the homestay, local people would get used to see the foreign people, and not be shy to communicate with them.

Hakusan Biosphere Reserves (MHBR), which is one of nine BRs in Japan, was chosen to conduct the course, because it is facing many environmental, social and economic challenges. Shiramine village which is situated in the transition zone of MHBR, was our field to conduct the course. The village compared to other villages in MHBR has the specific environmental conditions with lots of snow precipitations. Before the industrialization period in 1960th, this village was very rich by silk and charcoal production, and the population was more than three thousand people. However, after the rapid economic changing and introduction of the fossil fuels and cheap silk from China, the economy of the village started to drastically change, resulting in job lost, depopulation and filed abandonment. Now the population of Shiramine is about 850 people, and this number is annually declining (Hakusan City Homepage, 2018).

2. Methods and Results

To conduct the homestay activities, working group (WG) were created with the diverse members including academic researches, local villagers and local authorities. Principle investigator were responsible for the students and local NPO Hakusan Shiramine Nature School were selected as the leader to be responsible to communicate with the local villagers. Participant were 12 international students from Kanazawa University, with average age ±24 years. All students had diverse backgrounds and majors. Before visiting Shiramine village, none of the participants had the information about the MHBR or Shiramine village. The students were selected by WG and the selection criteria were as follows: ability to understand Japanese language and culture, willingness to make community-service activities, and ability to participate in both winter and summer homestays. Pre-homestay study was conducted for the students to introduce the local lifestyle and some local regulations. Lectures were provided by professional instructors, who worked in MHBR Council and local stakeholder. Lectures were covering geological, morphological and cultural aspects of Shiramine village and Mt. Hakusan

Host families were selected by the local NPO, and after long communications and explanations of the programs purpose, only 6 houses (with 18 family members) were agree to accept the students (Table 1). Interviews were conducted with the leaders of the village communities, and agreement were taken to accept 12 students for homestay. Pre-homestay meeting for the hosts was conducted twice and were

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managed by local NPO. It was requested from the host not the treat the students as the guests, but rather to treat them as family members, and ask to provide any kind of job, that they thing are necessary. The homestay activities were controlled by the local NPO. Each homestay activity was prepared in consultation with all host members and service activities were carefully chosen (Table 1). Before starting the Homestay program, all students visited the Shiramine village, to be familiar with his/her host family. Winter homestay (February) and Summer homestay (July) were conducted for 6 days each. During both homestay programs, students performed service activities, and experienced the real challenges that are faced by locals in their daily life. At the end of each winter and summer homestay program, the WG organized the Post-Homestay meeting both for the students and the villagers and data collection with interviews were conducted.

Table 1. List of Host Houses and Community-Service Activities Performed by the Students

	Host houses	Number of family members	Main job	Community-service Activity
1.	Elderly Couple	2	Forestry	Helping in forest management
2.	Two generation house	3	Local Guide	Helping with house cleaning
3.	Young single	1	Volunteer activist	Volunteering for elderly
4.	Three generation house A	4	Temple Priest	Cleaning the temple
5.	Young family	5	Industry	Helping with daily life
6.	Three generation house B	3	Temple Priest	Helping with local events

2.1 Data Collection

For host family members, data collection was conducted to evaluate the changings in the attitudes towards the foreigners before and after the homestay programs. For students, before and after homestay data collection was carried out to evaluate the awareness level and attitudes on local lifestyle. Open-ended with closed-ended questions were collected with yes/no replies, to evaluate the changes. Attitudes were employed by Likert scale of four rates 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree and 4 = Strongly Disagree, and concerns were rates as 1 = Not concerned at all, 2 = Somewhat concerned, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Concerned, 5 = Very concerned. Awareness was scored by 1 = Very Bad, 2 = Bad, 3 = Good, 4 = Very Good.

3. Results

Before the homestay all family members replied that they were very concerned to receive foreigners in their houses (n-18). 33% replied that cultural difference such as food and communication are the biggest concern and 22% replied that matching the daily lifestyle activities is the hardest thing. After the program, all family members replied that they enjoyed time spend with the foreigners. 83% replied

that they would like to receive the students again. The rest replied that they would like to accept students, but for shorter period. On the question if it was difficult to communicate with the foreigners everyone replied as No. Most of the villagers (72%) replied that the winter homestay was the hardest one, because of less activities, and uncertainties. During summer homestay the 83% replied that they were less concerned, and 17% replied that they were not concerned because they knew the students' behavior.

86% students replied that homestay opportunity helped to notice and be aware about the local issues, while performing the community-service activities. On a question if they would like to continue to live in Shiramine 86% replied Yes, and 14% No. All students replied that they would like to continue helping and volunteering the villagers. Community-service activities and communicating with local villagers were the most popular activities among the students.

4. Discussion

Japan for centuries was considered as the most monocultural and insulated country in the world, and for many years had the strong immigration policies controlling the number of foreigners. Foreign worker population has been a major issue, since 1980th and later the immigration dynamics changed with the influx of the number of foreigners (Tezuka, 2005), and Japan was recognized as the multicultural and multi-national country. McVeigh (1998) argues that Japanese people had trouble to accept foreigners, because Japan have never been ruled by the foreign power. However, even Japan was recognized as the multicultural state, still many discriminations are felt towards foreigners. Foreigners in Japan are called "gaijin", literally "person from outside" and it creates the sense of discrimination for all non-Japanese. One of the reasons for the discriminations is so called "foreign-complex" which originates from linguistic barriers and interpersonal shyness (Kowner, 2002; Haugh, 2003). Kowner (2002) argues that because of the Japanese communication difficulties, during intercultural encounter Japanese start to feel status violations, which cause alarm and distress. Language barrier, miscommunications and cultural misunderstandings have created the cultural stereotypes towards the foreigners and created the alertness in local's behaviors during any encounter with them.

Unlike big cities in Japan where English can be used for communications, villagers in the rural areas speaks only Japanese, and therefore to avoid language barrier, in our study we have selected students who were able to communicate in Japanese. But in spite to the ability to communicate in Japanese, local people still felt very concerned to accept students for homestay.

So, we may consider that the language barrier was not the only case which created the issues to avoid foreigners. During our research we found that villagers felt very concerned about the regional issues, such as depopulation, aging, lack of accessibility to the welfare sectors and schools due to the remote locations, no young followers and etc. In addition to this, because of the strong stereotypical and stressful perception of the foreigners, the idea to accept the foreigners in the village, created another new issue for them, and it was not related with the language barrier. All villagers replied that they were

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afraid of foreigner's behavior in real-life experience. Daily life behavior in Japan is derived from the traditional culture and have different ways of acting and expression with strict rules and manners (Kamachi, 1999). Ikegami argues that this kind of behaviors represents the deep cultural values which are appropriate for different situations, and thus represents the beliefs of what is good, right and desirable inside the community (Ikegami, 2005). Japanese people since the young age are educated to act in the frames of norms about how they should conduct themselves, and for most of Japanese these kind of "ethical behaviors" are becoming a common senses and creates the homogeneity in their social customs (Morris-Suzuki, 1995). Such kind of non-verbal communication is not so well understood for non-Japanese people, and its improper interpretations with following behavior may cause many misunderstandings and confrontations.

Thus we can suggest, that encountering with foreigners creates the alertness in their "inappropriate behavior" which can be accepted as an offensive act. In fact, we have heard from the locals, that during the homestay, some simple actions by the foreigners like speaking loudly or walking with sleepers on tatami (traditional Japanese floor) were accepted as very offensive behavior. However, after the first homestay (winter) program 83% replied that they felt less concerned to accept students for the second time. This have showed that awareness towards the foreigners' behavior was increased and the sense of alertness was reduced. One of the villagers expressed, that he already the behavior of the students, and he could even trust his house so that they can freely use it, when he was working outside.

In terms of the students, we found that after the homestay activities, the willingness to work and live in Shiramine was increased (86%). Homestay programs helped the students to increase the motivations and willingness to work in the rural areas. One students' states "hearing that the population of the village is decreasing, I had somehow thought that it would make for a quiet, even boring lifestyle where there is maybe not that much to do. Surely there was plenty thigs to do: from helping out around the house and all the service-activities. The local social life also showed a tight-knit and lively community, with many duties to be performed".

Homestay activities in the MHBR site, provided us with the important results to understand, what is the biggest obstacle to accept foreign settlements in the remote village areas of Japan. We have found that villagers are afraid of foreigners' behavior more and non-verbal communication can be mistakenly interpreted. This kind of homestay program, was conducted for the first time in the rural area of Mount Hakusan Biosphere Reserve, and we found that real-life experience with foreigners as homestay program may reduce the sense of alertness and raise the awareness towards the foreigners' behavior. The research provided the important data and results, which revealed the main problems and obstacles that halt the region to be open for the foreign settlements, however further researches must be conducted with more qualitative data and statistical analysis to elucidate the relationship between the family members and the students.

5. Conclusion

This study practically showed that after the Homestay activities, local villagers living inside the Biosphere Reserves, were agree to accept foreigners and changed the perceptions towards the foreigners' behavior. The research also showed that the language barrier was not the main factor which created the alertness towards the foreigners, but the non-verbal communication of foreigners' behavior was the main concern.

Acknowledgement

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