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## **The potential of remote areas: The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the disaster-prone tourism sector of the Aso region in Japan**

The tourism sector was one of the hardest hit sectors in Japan during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic (OECD 2020). This was especially true for Kumamoto prefecture's rural Aso region, where tourism is one of the main contributors to its economy and employment (Kubo 2021, 24). The region, which is situated within the circumference of a still active volcanic caldera, is prone to natural disasters, but its tourism sector has a proven track record of resilience in the face of such events. Results of an online survey that we conducted show that the local tourism industry considers itself proficient in coping with the aftermath of conventional natural disasters such as earthquakes and floods. This raises the question of whether or not this resilience also applies to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This paper therefore aims to analyse the similarities and differences in attitudes and approaches when dealing with natural disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic in the tourism sector of the Aso region. To achieve this, our team opted for a sequential mixed-methods approach. First, we conducted an online survey with 18 representatives of the tourism industry of the Aso region in order to gauge the state of the sector during natural disasters and the pandemic. To deepen our understanding of these findings, we then conducted three qualitative interviews with representatives on the forefront of the tourism sector in the region.

In the first section we examine the current existing academic literature which helped to provide the initial framework for this paper. The two following sections lay out the methods we employed to gather and analyse the data, and include our key findings. The paper concludes with an attempt to put our findings in perspective, as well as a reflection on the online research project itself.

## Literature review

In terms of research on disaster-prone areas, especially with a focus on Kumamoto prefecture, tourism is seen as particularly important during the long-term recovery phase, as it contributes to disseminating information to tourists and gaining knowledge regarding natural disaster management (Chan et al. 2019, 1880–1). The findings of the 2018 study conducted by Chan et al. using twelve informants and stakeholders in the tourism sector in Kumamoto prefecture suggest that critical events such as earthquakes bring people in the local community together and therefore strengthen resilience. The study's findings laid the groundwork for our research question to investigate whether this resilience was also applicable in the current COVID-19 pandemic.

Tourism in Japan in the time of COVID-19 has already received considerable attention from researchers. Nguyen (2020) looks at the development of Japanese inbound tourism, which exhibited rapid growth prior to the COVID-19 pandemic but declined dramatically as the crisis took hold in early 2020. Natural disasters have a significant negative effect on tourism in Japan both in the short term and during the post-disaster phase and therefore measures need to be taken to mitigate their impact (Nguyen 2020, 1). The same is true for the situations we are witnessing now with COVID-19. According to Nguyen, tourism infrastructure must be improved, information must be made available and safety measures must be prioritised in order to revive tourism (Nguyen 2020, 19–20). Based on Nguyen's findings, we examined and compared answers put forward by local experts and representatives of the tourism sector in Aso.

One such expert is the Aso-based Takayuki Kubo, who has worked extensively on the topic of tourism in Aso and his vision for the region's "post-corona era", in which he offers various suggestions for addressing the COVID-19 crisis. Kubo notes that economic gain is not necessarily the highest priority for local people in Aso, as he believes they place more importance on living a life that is true to themselves and enriches their well-being in the broadest sense. He goes on to share his recommendations for how tourism and thus the economy in Aso could be revitalised. These include rebranding the tourism industry, expanding services to include non-spatially-limited products and services, and increasing experience opportunities (Kubo 2021, 24–7; Kubo 2020, 72–5).

Based on these observations, we decided to investigate the state of the tourism sector during the pandemic and compare it with common natural disasters by conducting a quantitative survey. To further expand on the re-

sults, as well as to dig deeper into Kubo's aforementioned vision for the tourism sector, we decided to conduct qualitative interviews with representatives of the industry in Aso, including an interview with Kubo himself.

## Quantitative results

The main foundation for our research was a study we had previously conducted on the similarities and differences in attitudes and approaches towards dealing with natural disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic in the tourism sector in the Aso region. In mid 2021 we had carried out a survey via Google Forms, in which 18 representatives from the tourism sector in the Aso region had participated, ranging from representatives of hotels and restaurants to travel agencies. The tourism-and-crisis-themed questionnaire was divided into four sections with a total of 28 questions in Japanese about natural disasters and the pandemic. The majority of the questions were scalar-scored matrix questions, with a few open-ended questions for further elaboration. The survey provided our team with some initial insights into whether the region's tourism industry expertise, with its long-proven and successful track record of handling natural disasters, would be of use in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. The answers also helped us gauge the state of the tourism sector during the pandemic.

However, the results clearly showed that the experience and strategies acquired in the aftermath of natural disasters were not viewed as applicable to the industry in reviving tourism, and that the pandemic was seen as significantly more devastating than natural disasters. While respondents strongly felt that natural disasters were better managed in the Aso region than elsewhere in Japan, this confidence was not evident in the management of the COVID-19 pandemic (see fig. 1).

One of the main reasons for this difference was the level of aid and relief provided by the state. While the tourism industry appeared relatively satisfied with governmental aid and support after the Kumamoto earthquakes in 2016, satisfaction was significantly lower in regard to the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the challenges posed by the pandemic were judged to be much greater than in the case of conventional natural disasters, with respondents noting the unforeseeable length of the pandemic in contrast with the more predictable timeframes of natural disasters. This uncertainty, which was often mentioned in the open-ended questions, and the financial expense involved in adapting to constantly changing conditions clearly contributed to the comparatively pessimistic outlook. Overall, sentiment surrounding the current and future prospects of the tourism industry in the Aso region was

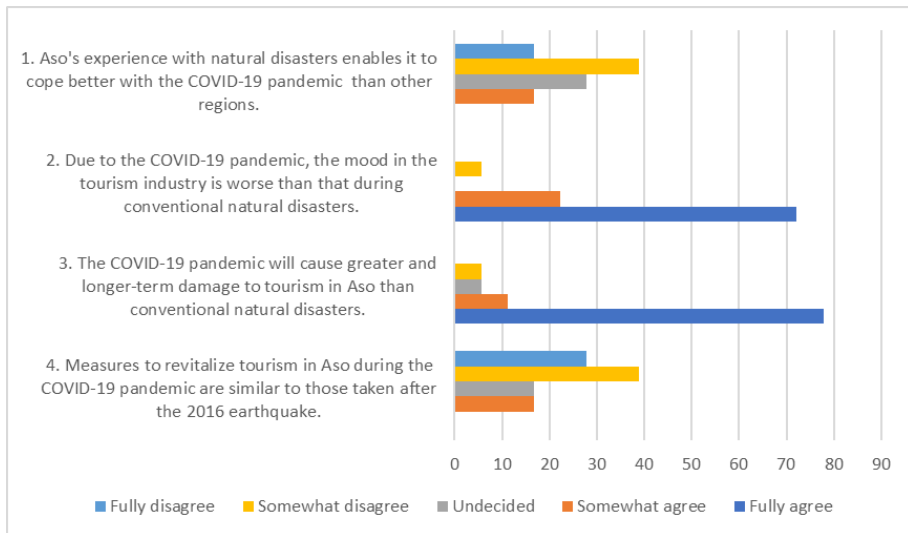


Fig. 1. Differences between natural disasters and COVID-19

considerably more negative following the pandemic than after natural disasters such as the Kumamoto earthquakes in 2016.

In summary, our survey showed that although respondents regarded Aso as better at coping with natural disasters than other regions, this confidence did not extend to dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. This negative attitude in the tourism industry appeared to stem from the conviction that the impact of the pandemic would damage tourism in the Aso region more severely than previous natural disasters. Results from the survey show that the tourism industry is unlikely to be able to restore the status quo in the same way as after natural disasters, but instead will have to adjust to a new reality shaped by the uncertainty surrounding the length and impact of the pandemic. To further expand on that notion, our team conducted three interviews with representatives of the tourism industry in the Aso region.

### Qualitative results

These three interviews were carried out by our team during the course of the University of Vienna's Aso Winter Field School in February 2022 and they provided valuable insights for our research topic. First and foremost, an interview with Takayuki Kubo, the head of the Minamiaso Tourism Association, provided information about the inner workings and newly adopted strategies of the tourism industry for countering the effects of the

pandemic. Another interview with a representative of the Aso City Tourism Branch supplied us with reliable data on tourist numbers before and after the pandemic, as well as explanations about the differences between natural disasters and the pandemic. In addition, a highly insightful interview with the operator of a rental bicycle shop in the region provided us with a perspective from one of the stronger “survivors” of the pandemic. Thematical Analysis using the MAXQDA programme was used to code all the interviews. The coding process revealed the following categories: characteristics of tourism, impact of the pandemic, differences between disasters, measures for coping and visions for the post-corona era.

We will begin with an overview of the characteristics of tourism in the Aso region and the impact of the pandemic on tourism. According to data provided by the Aso City Tourism Branch, there was a dramatic decline in tourist numbers from 606,611 people per year in 2019 before the start of the pandemic to 226,450 per year during the pandemic in 2021, a decrease of two thirds in the total number of tourists. Within this, the decline in international tourists was even more marked, dropping from 156,936 in 2019 to a mere 15,031 in 2021, reflecting Japan’s restrictive entry policy for foreign visitors since the start of the pandemic. Consequently, all tourism-related businesses ranging from hotels and restaurants to transport-related operations such as taxis and buses have been hit hard by the pandemic. The impact has even been felt by the region’s culturally important agriculture businesses, due to the greatly reduced demand for food for tourists. However, against this backdrop of decline, one group of tourists maintained relatively high numbers despite the pandemic. These were the local day-trippers, who were mostly making their way to Aso from the neighbouring metropolitan areas of Kumamoto city and Fukuoka city. On this point, all our sources concluded that Aso’s remote and spacious geographical features enabled the region to benefit from sustained tourism by day visitors who frequently returned to the region during the pandemic.

One of our most interesting insights concerned the differences between natural disasters and the pandemic. Given that the Aso region had shown resilience in the face of unforeseen events, one of our guiding questions during our interviews was whether the tourism industry’s crisis-proven track record in the face of various natural disasters would provide confidence for coping with the pandemic. Despite glimpses of fighting spirit in our interviews, overall sentiment appeared much bleaker than in the case of natural disasters. The rental bicycle shop owner compared the effects of the pandemic to those

of an anaphylactic shock and described how after a natural disaster people would come together and link hands in their fight against a clearly visible “enemy”, whereas with COVID-19 the enemy is virtually invisible and the people and tourists themselves are the “problem”. He remarked that “natural disasters are a battle between humans and earthquakes. Pandemics are a battle of people against people” (Interview with rental bicycle shop operator). Another apt comparison was made by Kubo, who concluded that natural disasters affect the “hard” tangible things, e.g., the infrastructure, whereas the pandemic affects the “soft” intangible things, and thus countermeasures are more difficult to implement. His comments are worth quoting in full:

During a pandemic, for example, it’s necessary to ask guests to disinfect, wear a mask and take other pandemic-specific measures. However much effort the hotel makes, you’re usually not going to see good results unless the guests cooperate. So, in that sense, I think measures against the pandemic are more difficult. Preparation for earthquakes and natural disasters is more about the tangible side of things (*hādomen* ハード面) like buildings, whereas pandemics are more about intangible things (*sofutomen* ソフト面), such as being careful about how you communicate with customers. That’s why it’s really difficult—and was really difficult—because it’s not just the management but all the staff who have to work together, and the customers have to be involved too. (Interview with Kubo 2022)

It was also noted that a change in mentality is needed to effectively soften the blow of the pandemic. Aso’s main strength in regard to the pandemic lies in its remote and spacious geographical location. Therefore, the tourism industry in Aso is trying to reinvent itself and steer away from its previous emphasis on mass tourism. Kubo used the term *himitsu ryokō*, literally “secret travel”, to describe this new concept with its focus on experiencing the great outdoors and intimate experiences, such as hotels in the region catering for room service rather than guests eating meals in the hotel restaurants. Kubo’s vision was also shared by the representative of the Aso City Tourism Branch, who foresees a major shift in strategy for the region away from “group tourism” to “individual tourism”, noting that camping provision might become more lucrative in the future. This shift was also recognised by the rental bicycle shop operator, who has succeeded in maintaining his business activities during the pandemic.

In summary, the Aso region has been severely affected by rapidly decreasing tourist numbers since the start of the pandemic, which have nega-

tively impacted numerous businesses in the area. Generally speaking, strategies implemented to deal with natural disasters have not been applicable to the pandemic and knowledge gained from the former does not appear to have translated well to the current situation. Nonetheless, the region is trying to reposition itself as a safe travel destination where people can experience the great outdoors and the intimacy of non-group travel.

### **Concluding remarks**

The tourism sector in the Aso region has been severely affected by the dramatic decline in tourist numbers caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the pandemic, tourist numbers have fallen to an unprecedented extent, even when compared to previous natural disasters. The representative of the Aso Tourism Association describes the tourism industry as a joy-related industry that fills the area with smiling faces. Naturally, the prolonged absence of such joyful faces has seriously dented sentiment in the sector. The pandemic poses a threat to numerous tourism-related businesses in the Aso region, even threatening agriculture-related industries. This reflects the state of many other regions worldwide (OECD 2020).

Since regional rather than urban tourism may become more attractive to tourists in the face of COVID-19 health concerns, it is likely that spacious and less densely populated areas will become popular tourist destinations during a pandemic (Nguyen 2020, 19). Hence, shifting the focus towards regional tourism could well prove to be a sensible strategy during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. In line with such views in the literature regarding measures to counter the effect of the pandemic on tourism in Japan, the Aso region is trying to take innovative steps to reposition itself as a more private, outdoor-oriented and safe travel destination. These were insights we were able to garner from representatives of the tourism sector in Aso, including the Aso City Tourism Branch, the Minamiaso Tourism Association and local business operators.

We were also able to expand and elaborate on preceding research concerning tourism in disaster-prone areas such as Aso (Chan et al. 2019) by contextualising the expertise, knowledge and mindset that had been acquired within the current COVID-19 pandemic. As Chan et al. explains, a good host-guest relationship is vital for creating trust, value and the social capacity to encounter future crises, and this was also a key factor cited by Kubo in relation to the pandemic. We were able to assess that the tourism industry in Aso is highly confident in its handling of natural disasters compared to other re-

gions. However, our quantitative and qualitative results clearly show that the experience acquired from natural disasters has not proved applicable to the current pandemic, which is viewed as a significantly more serious challenge by the sector. The difference was aptly summed up by one respondent who described natural disasters as damaging the “hard”, tangible infrastructure of society, whereas COVID-19 affects the “soft” intangible side of things.

As for the limitations of this paper, it must be stated that our research focused solely on the tourism sector’s perspective on the subject matter. To fully evaluate the possible success of the countermeasures, other variables such as the demographic of the local population with its high proportion of elderly people should also be taken into account. In this regard, our interviews indicated that there was relatively strong opposition against incoming tourists within the elderly local community at the start of the pandemic but that this began to fade as the roll-out of the vaccine progressed throughout the Aso region. A second point to note concerning the limited scope of our research project is that survivorship bias must be taken into account in our qualitative research, as it was mostly business operators and people doing relatively well during the pandemic who were eager to take questions from us.

That said, our research hopes to contribute at least a few ideas and suggestions on how to counteract the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism sector. The sustainability of disaster-prone destinations is determined by taking a long-term perspective. Material and tangible preparations along with the more intangible relationships and spirit are all important (Jiang / Ritchie 2017). In this study, the Kumamoto tourism stakeholders have embraced all three pillars of sustainability in tourism recovery, e.g., recharging economic momentum after the disaster, the importance of the socio-cultural host-guest relationship and local spirit, and the conservation of landscapes and resources for new opportunities of product development.

## Reflections on the project

As a team fairly new to fieldwork, we were all eager to conduct our research in Japan. The virtual field trip, however, proved not only interesting and exciting, but also informative. We were able to gather an abundance of information regarding our research topic, as shown in the main part of this text. The fact that we were able to work hand in hand with the whole research group and the head of the group, with everyone helping each other out, had a significant impact on our personal motivation and the positive group dynamic. This project was an excellent way to experience fieldwork, whether as a be-



ginner learning the ropes or as a veteran trying out new and innovative approaches.

Because of our specific focus on tourism in the Aso region, our research did not have many points of overlap with the other teams. The main focus of our interviews was the gathering of information, and thus our most important interviews were conducted without the rest of the group. Apart from taking notes, our main responsibility was to ask further questions and go into more detail, which made it easier for us to understand the essence of our respondents' answers when transcribing and analysing them afterwards. After the field trip, our responsibilities changed to analysing and filtering our results; this was carried out mostly in our team, but it also included sharing our insights with the whole group.

The pandemic affected us personally as well as tourism in Japan. It was the reason we had to remain in Austria and were limited to our virtual devices for this trip. Despite this, we were able to achieve significant results. The fact that the modern world is making rapid technological advances and many institutions and individuals can contact each other virtually enabled us to schedule at least one interview per day. Most interviewees had access to a camera or webcam, so we were able to see and interpret non-verbal reactions such as facial expressions during our virtual interviews.

On the other hand, it sometimes proved difficult to “read” the virtual room and we may have missed things that would have been apparent in face-to-face meetings. There were also occasional technical difficulties and we had the additional problem of different time zones when scheduling interviews. Despite these downsides, there is no doubt in our minds that the path we were forced to take during our online field trip worked well and provided us with all the necessary information for our research question.

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