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A Case Study of a Mechanism to Create Local Value Using Local Resources

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to elucidate the mechanism of value creation. While novel strategies for utilizing forest resources are expected worldwide, Japan has the potential to utilize forest resources for tourism. In this paper, we conducted a literature review on advanced forest therapy projects in Japan and conducted interviews with the people involved. Furthermore, a strategic analysis framework of regional economic value chains was used to explain the value creation mechanism of tourism management.

Keywords: Case Study, Tourism Management, Creating Regional Value

JEL Classification Code (up to 3-5): M10, R00, Z30

1. Introduction

Japan's population is declining due to low birthrate and aging, and this trend is particularly prominent in rural areas outside major cities. Therefore, stimulating demand and creating jobs through tourism management are essential. The country has a unique culture and history, climate, natural environment, and food culture; thus, it holds high potential for tourism management. Additionally, Japan has abundant forests, and forest re-sources must be utilized for tourism.

Since the 1980s, forest bathing, an atmospheric bathing method backed by scientific evidence, has been popular in Japan. The practice has spread to Europe, the US, and other Asian countries. Recently, a number of empirical studies have been conducted on the effects of forest bathing from the medical perspective.

In 2004, Japan's Forestry Agency launched the Forest Therapy Study Group, established as a nonprofit organization in 2008. In March 2008, the Japan Forest Therapy Society (<https://www.fo-society.jp>) was established as a nonprofit organization and

received a commercial trademark for forest therapy. The Forest Therapy Society supports practical forest therapy activities that organically connect communities through forests. Moreover, it certifies forest therapies that have a scientific healing effect and contribute to individuals' health. Currently, there are 65 forest therapy programs in Japan.

This study will elucidate the mechanism of value creation through advanced forest therapy activities in Japan intended for tourism management. By analyzing the interconnectedness of human movements and organizations in the region, we believe we can elucidate the mechanisms of value creation.

Much of the research on forest bathing and forest therapy is empirical, based on psychology and physiology. In addition, there is limited research on tourism management that strategically analyzes the actors involved in forest therapy. Therefore, this study fills this research gap.

2. Literature review

The literature on forest utilization, rural tourism, and tourism management is dominated by survey



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analyses of tourists' needs and satisfaction in various countries. For example, Schmitz et al. [19] analyzed the needs of tourists interested in exploring Spain's natural and cultural characteristics. Kelley et al. [10] investigated the demand and determinants of walking trails in Ireland. Other studies have focused on tourism management, social pursuits, and value calculation for policymaking. Matarrita-Cascante et al. [12] conducted interviews with rural communities in Costa Rica and questioned respondents regarding the impact of tourism on their communities and community satisfaction. Edwards et al. [3] modeled forest recreation values for policymaking. Moreover, McCabe [13] used a survey on tourism and quality of life to highlight how satisfied social tourists are with respect to tourism. Additionally, Hall [6] studied tourism sustainability. Supported by scientific evidence, forest bathing is an atmospheric bathing practice that started in approximately 1982. For example, Lee et al. [11] reported on forest bathing's effect on preventing mental and neurological diseases, and Ochiai et al. [15] examined the stress-relieving and relaxing effects of forest bathing.

Gurbey [5] investigated and proposed locations in Turkey where forest bathing can be implemented as ecotourism. Following a decline in tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic, Mihardja et al. [14] proposed a new type of tourism in Bali that combines forest bathing and environmental conservation. Farkic et al. [4] suggested the possibility of mindful tourism based on interviews with people who had experienced forest bathing. Using physiology in natural sciences, numerous studies on forest therapy have been validated. For example, Ohe et al. [17] proposed the concept of forest therapy tourism from the perspective of physiology and rural management studies to reduce stress among urban residents. The authors further conducted blood pressure measurements at a forest therapy base in Chizu-cho, Tottori Prefecture, Japan, and verified its relaxation effect. Yon et al. (2014) compared forest therapy policies between Japan and Korea. Yokoyama et al. [20] estimated the local economic ripple effects (2010-2015) of the Shinano-machi forest therapy base. Katsura and Nasu [9] presented a theory of regional revitalization through the forestry business. Similarly, Zhang et al. [21] used typification and

comparison to present the issues associated with forest therapy for health promotion in China. Hirashima and Satoshi [7] examined the relationship between forest therapy road certification and its contribution to the region.

As the COVID-19 pandemic enhanced health awareness, Zhao et al. [22] analyzed the relationship between health beliefs and planned behaviors using a survey on forest therapy tourists in China. Cvikl et al. [2] proposed forest therapy tourism for sustainable development policymaking in Slovenia owing to the increasing need for therapeutic tourism following the pandemic. Pichler et al. [18] examined the effects of mountain walking and forest therapy on physiological and immune parameters in Italy. Following the pandemic, the need for forest therapy tourism management for health promotion and treatment has been increasing globally. For the development of tourism management, a detailed examination of the operational mechanism of Japan's excellent forest therapy is necessary. Moreover, this area requires further academic attention. This study analyzes and systematizes tourism management in Shinano-machi. Based on the findings from the literature review, interview survey, regional value chain analysis, and quantitative text analysis, a value creation model with forest therapy for tourism management is presented. In terms of value creation through forest-based tourism management globally, the case study of Shinano-machi's tourism management based on organizational organic collaboration is anticipated to have an academic impact on scholars and a practical impact on practitioners.

3. Materials and Method

Descriptive case studies were selected as the research method. Case studies can be exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory (Yin, 1984), because the method that carefully describes the phenomenon and story of the target case is suitable for explaining the process of value creation and causal relationships. The case study is based on published materials and an ongoing field study conducted during the period 2020-2023, as well as interviews with stakeholders.



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In addition, a literature review of existing research and other studies was used to verify the facts and data confirmation of the case study.

A qualitative study based on unstructured interviews and participant observation was conducted. An inductive approach was used to elucidate the process by which value is created through tourism management of cutting-edge forest therapy.

4. Case study

4.1 Forest Therapy in Shinano-machi, Nagano, Japan

Shinano-machi in Nagano Prefecture, Japan, is located in the northern part of the prefecture and is adjacent to Myoko city in Niigata Prefecture. As of April 2022, the population of Shinano-machi was approximately 7,800, with 3,300 households residing in the area. Shinano-machi has vast forests of oak and white birch trees and outstanding natural beauty. It is home to the Kurohime Plateau and Lake Nojiri. The town's primary industries are agriculture, forestry, and tourism. Particularly, rice cultivation using high-quality spring water, along with highland vegetables, tomatoes, corn, and other crops, is thriving. Historically, this area has been a recreation and summer resort. In summer, several tourists visit the area for mountain climbing and summer retreats, and in winter, tourists arrive for winter sports. Since 2002, Shinano-machi has been engaged in a forest therapy program under the Healing Forest Project. Shinano-machi Forest Therapy offers various forest therapy programs for tourists and corporate training programs in collaboration with 37 companies and other organizations in the suburbs of major cities. Additionally, Shinano-machi certifies nearby hotels and pensions as Healing Forest Inns® and forest therapy guides as Forest Medical Trainers®.

Authors should discuss the results and how they can be interpreted from the perspective of previous studies and of the working hypotheses. The findings and their implications should be discussed in the broadest context possible. Future research directions may also be highlighted.

4.2 Development of the Forest Therapy Business in Shinano-machi

In 2002, eight volunteers, including residents of Shinano-machi, predicted that Shinano town would be self-governing without merging with other towns; they pro-claimed that “We will solve the problems associated with farming and mountain villages by ourselves.” The Shinano Town Office—which represents the government—agreed to this idea, thereby marking the beginning of the forest therapy business in Shinano-machi.

Forest therapy in Shinano-machi has inherited the eco-medical healing philosophy (healing, health, and tourism town planning) of the late environmentalist C.W. Nicol. Subsequently, Shinano-machi developed human resources and systems related to its forest therapy project, known as Healing Forest Project. In 2006, the town was certified as a forest therapy base, and later in 2020, it became an advanced two-star certified therapy base. Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak in 2019, Shinano-machi reported approximately 6,200 annual users of forest therapy.

4.3 Forest Therapy Management in Shinano-machi

There are six primary stakeholders in forest therapy management in Shinano-machi. The characteristics of management methods and factors contributing to successful results will be elucidated through interviews.

4.3.1 Operational Entities of the Forest Therapy Project

One of the main characteristics of the management of forest therapy in Shinano-machi is that the six main organizations cooperate organically and efficiently. The following are the management entities of the Shinano-machi Forest Therapy Project:

- (1) Healing Forest Section of the Shinano Town Office
- (2) A commissioned management organization (Woods-Life-Community)
- (3) A consulting company (Satoyume)
- (4) A forest therapy research group (Hitotoki no Kai)



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- (5) The C.W. Nicol Afan Woodland Trust
- (6) A healing forest inn

The primary operator of the program has been the Healing Forest Section of the Commerce, Industry, and Tourism Division of Shinano Town Hall. In 2016, the operation was outsourced to a private organization named Woods-Life-Community. Through voluntary management, the company aims to create a sustainable business structure.

Additionally, Satoyume provides support for business plan development, corporate partnerships and marketing, and highland vegetable branding. The C.W. Nicol Afan Woodland Trust is located in Shinano-machi and cooperates with forest therapy. The Forest Therapy Study Group (Hitotoki no Kai) is a place of learning for forest medical trainers who manage the forest therapy program.

4.3.2 Features of the Shinano-machi Forest Therapy Program and Therapy Guide (Forest Medical Trainer®)

Shinano town offers three forest therapy courses: the Ojikaike, Nainotaki, and Zou-no-Komichi Courses, with distances of 12, 7, and 2.5 km, respectively. Additionally, these courses are barrier-free. The forest therapy program is tailored to visitors' objectives and length of stay. Furthermore, other programs, such as Zen meditation, yoga, aromatherapy, and night walks, are offered. The program fees are approximately 10,000-20,000, 10,000, and 15,000 JPY per person if staying overnight, for a half-day, and a full-day forest therapy trainer, respectively. Participants during forest therapy are instructed to breathe deeply to absorb the negative ions produced by the forest. They also engage in counseling, Tanden breathing exercises, harmony therapy, phytotherapy, and aromatherapy. In addition to trekking, Nordic walking, and learning about history and culture, visitors can enjoy the constellations, fireflies, and agriculture. Furthermore, the center offers corporate training programs in partnership with urban companies and organizations. The program includes communication training, team building, and self-management experiences. Training for employees reduces stress hormones, lowers blood pressure in hypertensive individuals, and decreases turnover among new employees. Forest

therapy guides provide advice on forest walking and exercise to enhance the benefits of forest bathing. In Shinano-machi, forest therapy guides are uniquely named as Forest Medical Trainers®, and the mayor certifies them. These trainers travel to the forest along with users and provide forest therapy, health checks, immunotherapy, and other services.

Shinano-machi has been working to certify Forest Medical Trainers® as a subsidized project of Nagano Prefecture. For certification, trainers must undertake comprehensive training in forest function studies, aromatherapy, phytotherapy, counseling, and safety management. Approximately half of these trainers belong to the Forest Therapy Research Association (Hitotoki no Kai), and they continue to study forest therapy in collaboration with doctors. Additionally, they offer courses for residents in phytotherapy, naturopathic medicine, and dietary therapy, etc.

4.3.3 Healing Forest Inn® Business

Shinano-machi certifies pensions and hotels located near forest therapy areas as Healing Forest Inns®. Currently, there are 32 certified inns collaborating on forest therapy programs. Certified inns offer therapy meals prepared with local morning vegetables, wild vegetables, medicinal herbs, and herbal and medicinal herb tea to the clients of the therapy program. Additionally, they offer aromatherapy and other healing services. Healing lodges and forest therapy operators collaborate to produce healing perfumes, teach healing bathing methods, and conduct healing evening programs. These certified inns include 29 pensions and three hotels. The three hotels are medium-to-large resorts that can accommodate skiers and golfers, offering conference rooms and Wi-Fi access to accommodate vacationers.

5. Results and Analysis

5.1 Regional Value Chain Analysis

This study conducted a regional value chain framework analysis based on results of interviews with actors involved in the Shinano-machi Forest Therapy Project. According to Itakura et al. [8], the



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concept of a regional value chain is “based on regional commitment, which is viewed as the engine of multilayered regional leadership and the function of newly combining internal and external forces.” It is a framework in which local re-sources, town development, and services provided by merchants’ associations are per-ceived as a joint enterprise that incorporates external forces and results in local revitalization. The following topics were included in the interviews: (1) regional commitment (love for the region, sense of mission, meritorious involvement, and cooperation with the region), (2) regional leadership (idea, creator, and coordinator connecting outside and inside the region), (3) new combination of forces internal and external to the region (experts, cultural figures, and companies outside the region), (4) processing, manufacturing, selling, and services, (5) site-specific storytelling (stories unique to the region), and (6) performance indicators (performance).

The interviewees included Shinano-machi town officials, the commissioning organization head, a pension manager, a Forest Medical Trainer®, businesspeople, tourists, facility users, and Shinano-machi residents.

5.1.1 Regional Commitment

A forest therapy trainer must be an effective forest therapy instructor and a community storyteller who carries on the history and traditions of the area. Additionally, this role takes on the task of coordinating between tourists and local residents. Interviews with the chairperson and vice chairperson of the forest therapy trainer revealed the reality of regional commitment.

During the Edo period (1603–1867), Shinano-machi flourished as a major connection point between Kanazawa in Ishikawa Prefecture and Edo. In the 1920s, Canadian missionaries developed the Lake Nojiri area as a summer resort. The residents of Shinano-machi engage in agriculture and forestry and provide summer vacation homes and winter sports havens. In 2002, the locals of Shinano-machi decided to operate the town independently rather than merging it with other towns. Some residents had a strong sense of mission to promote local revitalization by taking advantage of forest therapy using local forest resources. Those involved in forest

therapy in Shinano-machi tend to be sincerely committed to local issues and feel a sense of fulfillment in talking about the community. They exhibit a sense of purpose in using forest therapy to revitalize the com-munity.

5.1.2 Regional Leadership

Residents and leaders of the community have been involved in the development of human resources and creation of systems related to the forest therapy business. In Shinano-machi, six organizations are collaborating to promote the forest therapy projects. The leaders of each organization cooperate with each other to manage the forest therapy program. For example, the Healing Forest Section of the Shinano Town Office supports the entire forest therapy program. Similarly, Woods-Life-Community, a general incorporated association, which is the operating entity, leads the promotion of the project. In addition, one of the leaders runs a local consulting company. He acts as a coordinator, marketing local resources to numerous other regions and encouraging corporate partnerships. The company sells local specialty products in association with forest therapy and promotes sixth industrialization in cooperation with local producers and distributors.

5.1.3 New Combination of Forces Internal and External to the Region

In Shinano-machi, people from outside the community are active members of the forest therapy operation and are welcomed by an atmosphere of acceptance. People from within and outside the community cooperate in the activities. Some forest medical trainers and pension managers of healing lodges have also moved to the area. The combination of internal and external forces to the region has become a driving force for value creation.

Shinano-machi is increasingly capable of incorporating forces external to the region, as is evident from the incorporation of Nicol’s philosophy. Furthermore, its capability is also proved by the historically high-level of human traffic and use of outside forces to generate value within the community. Following the settlement of Canadian and other missionaries in the area during the 1920s,



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the area continued to host vacationers in the summer and skiers in the winter.

5.1.4 Processing, Manufacturing, Selling, and Services

Interviews with lodge managers, business owners, and local residents revealed pat-terns in local business management. Collaborative work that directly utilizes forest therapy in tourism and service businesses is underway.

In Shinano-machi, the products of agriculture and forestry are being utilized in the tourism and service industries. These applications include hotel and pension management, winter sports-related industries, tourism tour support, Internet home sales, and sports camp attractions. In addition, the area is attracting companies and satellite offices. Furthermore, the promotion of local highland vegetables is underway.

5.1.5 Site-Specific Storytelling

Regarding effective guidance in forest therapy, it is important to narrate the region's unique traditional history and value for tourists. The development of forest therapy is linked to the compilation of local love and inherited thoughts and philosophies as principles and values; forest therapy maintains and improves them through storytelling.

The forest therapy project in Shinano-machi follows Nicol's seminal eco-medical healing philosophy. This philosophy of preserving the region's rich nature and continuing to provide wellness and healing is being developed as a value for revitalizing traditional Japanese social culture.

5.1.6 Performance Indicators

Shinano-machi is working to identify the results of forest therapy. It is conducting customer surveys and monitoring the number of visitors using its services, and it has set up a permanent contact point for inquiries. Furthermore, it is working with medical institutions to collect data on observable benefits, including reduction in stress and blood pressure. The company hosts employee training programs for companies and organizations using forest therapy. It also conducts educational activities for the local community.

6. Discussion

This study has elucidated the structure of tourism management through forest therapy utilizing local resources in Shinano-machi and its relationship with the local com-munity. Shinano-machi Forest Therapy is one of the most advanced operations delivering this service. Forest therapy is a concept that originated in Japan, and excellent examples of it can be found there. The main purpose of forest therapy in other countries is to maintain and restore physical capabilities through "walking in the forest," but in Japan, there is an additional purpose of recovering from stress and physical and mental fatigue.

First, the project is driven by an organized management structure and clear division of roles. The Woods-Life-Community is at the heart of the forest therapy operation and has been acting as a mediator and bridge between stakeholders since 2015. It aims for sustainable and proactive management. Satoyume is involved in the planning and operation of the project, providing guidance on certain promotional activities and negotiating with businesses that will function as promoters. Forest medical trainers, who connect tourists and businesses to the project, are supported by the Forest Therapy Research Association (Hitotokino Kai). The origin of the project's philosophy lies in the C.W. Nicol Affan Forest Trust. Local businesses, hotels, and loges are involved with the forest therapy project and participate in the therapy program as healing forest lodges.

Second, the project continues to share the same values and aspirations as those at the time of its inception. In our interviews, we confirmed that the members of Forest Therapy have inherited Nicol's philosophy of eco-medical healing. This philosophy and values continue to provide wellness and healing while protecting the rich natural environment of the region. Moreover, Shinano-machi's therapy aims to create values that regenerate traditional Japanese social culture and share them internationally. Third, there were no prior examples when the project began, and knowledge and wisdom from inside and outside the area were flexibly incorporated. In 2002, when Shinano-machi started its forest therapy business, there were no instances of therapy businesses being



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fully promoted either in Japan or abroad. Despite referring to examples of forest utilization in Germany and Scandinavia, the local residents independently created the system. The historical development of the region as a highway, recreation area, and summer resort also promotes interaction with people from outside the region.

The key points are as follows: (1) an organized management system and clear division of roles, (2) sharing of thoughts and values, (3) cooperation and flexible incorporation of knowledge and wisdom from within and outside the community, (4) awareness of sustainability with an orientation toward self-reliance regarding operations and profits, and (5) awareness of the development of the local community and value creation (Figure 1). Following the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an increasing need for healthy forest therapy tourism. Consequently, there is a need for tourism management in which local residents create and share values and cooperate autonomously and organically.

7. Conclusion

Research on forest bathing and forest therapy has so far focused mainly on physiological and empirical studies, while research on tourism and agricultural and mountain villages has also been dominated by analyses from the perspective of tourists.

The significance of this study lies in the fact that it analyzed the supply side of forest therapy using forests, a regional resource, from a social scientific perspective, as well as the factors and mechanisms that utilize local resources and create local value.

It is founded on the connection of organically linked organizations and the sharing of knowledge by people with a philosophy and clear intentions. In addition, local residents are aware of sustainability by flexibly incorporating the knowledge and wisdom of people outside the community, and are self-reliant in terms of operation and profitability.

However, a major limitation of this study is that it is a single case study, and quantitative verification using a large sample size will be an issue in the future. We hope that forest therapy will contribute to the creation of healthy and vibrant local communities and create value for local residents. There are no conflicts of interest related to this study.

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