

# Sustainable Tourism in the Pandemic Era: A Case Study of Japan

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**Abstract:** The sustainable tourism concept has been evolving continually and respectively with modern society's views on sustainability. The tourism industry constantly faces new challenges showing weak points and providing opportunities for further concept development. With the focus on Japan as a case study, this empirical research discusses the insights of key stakeholders about managing sustainable tourism development during the crisis. This research takes the COVID-19 pandemic as an example of a crisis, which provides an opportunity for the sustainable tourism concept for further evolution. The results indicated that public and private sector stakeholders have different visions of sustainable tourism development. Japan's current public sector approach to it implies resolving the issue of overtourism in main tourism destinations and providing comfortable living for local communities. However, it does not have any implications for making tourism more resilient to external crises. The proposals of stakeholders for response measures for future sustainable tourism development and related policies included the establishment of a crisis management system in the tourism sphere, focus on the development of domestic tourism, creation of proper guidelines for the tourism industry for actions in case of crisis, revision of traditional tourism techniques, the establishment of "new lifestyle"/adaptation to "with Corona" era, focusing on online business/tourism experience, focus on the development of small groups tours and individual tours, development of flexibility and adaptivity to changes in social conditions, incorporation of public health-related issues, non-contact content expansion, individual approach to different areas, and regional cooperation incorporation.

**Keywords:** Japan's tourism development, Sustainable tourism, COVID-19 crisis, Tourism industry resilience, Crisis response measures, Stakeholders' insights

## 1. Introduction

The sustainable tourism concept has developed as a natural consequence of the emergence of sustainable development ideas. It has been evolving continually and respectively with modern society's views on sustainability. Initially appearing as a reaction to the growing negative impact of traditional mass tourism on the environment, the concept included new components step by step. It advanced by incorporating the elements of social and economic equality as a response to the increasing discontent of local communities caused by overtourism phenomena. The tourism industry constantly faces new challenges showing weak points and providing opportunities for further concept development. Frequently occurring global crises are examples of such challenges.

Now sustainable tourism faces an unprecedented challenge of the global COVID-19 pandemic. However, despite the previous pandemics such as SARS, Avian flu, and H1N1 influenza, which apparent negative impact on the tourism industry and development different researchers explored and proved, the concept of sustainable tourism remained unchanged in this aspect (Page et al., 2012; Wang, 2009; Page et al., 2006; Kuo et al., 2008; Richter, 2003). This research explores how key sustainable tourism stakeholders are adapting the sustainable tourism concept and responding to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Previous studies on the impact of natural disasters and other crises on the tourism industry have repeatedly called for the development of measures to prevent the catastrophic consequences of future potential global natural disasters or health-related crises, especially those caused by pandemics and epidemics (Sigala, 2020; Gössling et al., 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic showed that making tourism more resilient to global health-related crises is a high priority for tourism policy and the rethinking of sustainable tourism concept. The current crisis in the tourism industry is an opportunity to develop proactive responses to similar potential situations in the future and incorporate adaptivity, flexibility, and resilience. One of the principles for sustainable tourism development is the inclusiveness of all interested parties (stakeholders) in sustainable tourism development and planning (Garrod, 2003). That is why it is crucial to study the insights of key stakeholders on the effect of the global pandemic on sustainable tourism development, their reactions, and their thoughts on the potential response measures for the future concept progress.

By conducting desk research and survey interviews with multilevel sustainable tourism stakeholders in Japan's Kanto region, this study seeks to uncover how key stakeholders administer the sustainable tourism development in Japan in the context of the macro-level health-related crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This research

responds to academics calling for exploration of perspective for sustainable tourism concept to evolve again under the influence of global public health-related crises and include the elements of crisis risk management in the idea of sustainability in sustainable tourism development (Sigala, 2020; Yeh, 2020; Gössling et al., 2020; Sneader & Singhal, 2020; Aliperti et al., 2019). Furthermore, the sustainable tourism concept needs to increase adaptivity, flexibility, and resilience to adapt to new circumstances and respond to challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

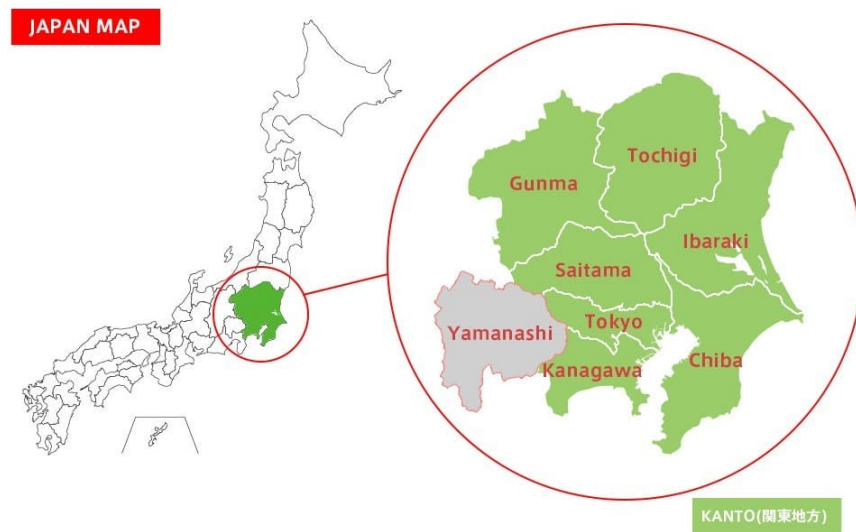
## 2. Background

Tourism had an exceptional position in Japan's economy before the global COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO) statistics, inbound tourism to Japan has been rapidly growing since 2012. The period immediately before 2020 was record-breaking in terms of inbound foreign tourists since statistics started to be recorded in 1964. Since 2016, the number of foreign tourists visiting Japan has exceeded 20 million people. The average annual growth of foreign tourists to Japan since 2012 was around 26%, which significantly exceeds the average change in the world and Asia in particular. According to the UNWTO, the average global increase in foreign tourists, and the average growth rate of tourist flow in the Asia-Pacific region, was 6% in 2018 (UNWTO, 2019). The growth of inbound tourism income in 2018 in the Japanese economy was more than 300% compared to 2012. Foreign tourists' consumption in 2019 reached JPY 4,813.5 billion, which is 6.5% compared with the previous year.

Sustainable development and sustainable tourism concepts are quite new for Japan. Sustainable tourism, as it is currently operationalized in Japan, is meant to solve the problem of congestion, etiquette violation, and other consequences of overtourism. However, little attention has been paid to such goals of sustainable tourism as nature conservation cultural preservation in official publications such as *Toward a Sustainable Tourism Developed Country* (MLIT, June 10, 2019), a governmental guideline and vision for sustainable tourism development. In addition, the document does not address measures for the tourism industry and destinations adaptation to possible risks of crises and/or disasters.

The scientific interest of this research lies in exploring the insights of key stakeholders on the effect of the global pandemic on sustainable tourism development and their opinions on the response measures for dealing with the consequences of the crisis and the utilization of sustainable tourism concept and related public policies in Japan. International tourism is the most affected in the tourism industry worldwide, as international tourist numbers have dropped to their lowest levels due to non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs). The NPIs measures to prevent virus spreading, such as internal travel restrictions, and border closure, have led to a significant decrease in tourism industry indicators worldwide. In addition, Japan has imposed entry restrictions to control the COVID-19 outbreak, which directly affected the number of foreign tourists entering the country. As a result, the number of foreign tourists to Japan decreased by 99.9% in 2020-2021 (MLIT, 2020), the most significant decline since statistics started to be recorded in 1964.

The Kanto region is one of Japan's eight regional divisions (eight regional divisions nationwide) and is located in the eastern part of Honshu. Although there is no clear definition of the scope, the Kanto region refers to the six prefectures of Ibaraki, Tochigi, Gunma, Saitama, Chiba, Kanagawa, and the greater Tokyo metropolitan area (Figure 1). According to the 2020 Population Census, the Kanto region has approximately one-third of the total population of Japan (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2020). Tokyo, Japan's capital, is located in Kanto Region and is the centre of Japan's politics and economy. The Kanto region has the largest GDP among eight regional divisions of Japan (in 2017, it was JPY 218,296.2 billion) (Economic and Social Research Institute, Cabinet Office, 2021, August 10). Furthermore, the Kanto region has held a leading position among the highest numbers of foreign national guests at accommodations in terms of international tourism.



Source: <https://matcha-jp.com/en/1362>

**Figure 1:** Kanto region

### 3. Materials and methods

This current study was inspired by the need for reapproaching the sustainable tourism concept in light of the global COVID-19 pandemic crisis that severely affected the whole tourism industry in the world and challenged current sustainable tourism development. Macro-level health-related crises, such as pandemics and epidemics, have a strong negative impact on the tourism sector's situation and development on a global scale. This impact has been studied and proven in several previous pandemics (namely SARS, avian flu, and H1N1 influenza) and confirmed by preliminary results of the COVID-19 pandemic. Academics and practitioners who have studied similar problems agreed that governments and other key tourism stakeholders need to consider previous pandemics' experience and change their approach to sustainable tourism development and related policies in the field of tourism. This problem is becoming more urgent since tourism in its sustainable form is considered one of the most effective instruments for sustainable development and remains an actual agenda around the world, especially for remote and developing regions.

This research explores how key stakeholders in Japan manage sustainable tourism development during the long-term global crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the author is also interested in investigating key sustainable tourism stakeholders' insights into possible ways of reapproaching sustainable tourism development to make tourism more sustainable and resilient. That prompted the author to ask the following research question: *How do tourism stakeholders in Japan approach sustainable tourism development during the long-term crisis periods?*

This research adopts a triangulation approach and several methodologies selected to provide necessary information to answer the research questions. These methodologies include two types of data collection: secondary data collection using desk research and primary data collection methods using email interviews and interview surveys. The unit of investigation of this study is Japan's tourism sector. Therefore, to thoroughly investigate the approach to sustainable tourism development, the author conducted data collection at several national, regional, and local levels. The first category of stakeholders is government organizations in Japan and Kanto region involved in tourism policy development and implementation. Namely, on the national level, it is the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport, and Tourism (国土交通省, *Kokudo-kōtsū-shō*) with Japan Tourism Agency (観光庁, *Kankō-chō*) as its unit; tourism promotion divisions of prefectural governments and governments of the administrative centres of prefectures in Kanto region; regional development agencies established to support regional or local development. The second category of stakeholders is destination management organizations, namely regional and local DMOs with a sphere of activity concentrated in particular geographical areas within the Kanto region. And the third category of stakeholders is private sector tourism

organizations in the Kanto region, namely entrepreneurs in the travel and tourism sector active in the field of accommodation, boarding, wellness, arrangement of travel services, etc.

### **3.1 Secondary data collection and analysis**

To formulate the background foundation for this research, the author used the desk research method to review and analyze various secondary sources of information at the initial stage of the work. The author began by collecting books and academic journal articles and reports, conference materials from public policy, sustainable tourism, sustainable development, stakeholders theory, and disaster risk management. Sources of information were collected in English and Japanese. Then, the author used this research method to clarify and narrow the research field, develop the study's theoretical framework, and determine the appropriate research methods. This stage lasted from September 2019 to June 2021.

After thoughtful desk research, the author focused on investigating how key stakeholders cope with sustainable tourism development in Japan's Kanto region in the context of the macro-level health-related crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The goals of this research were to 1) investigate the operationalisation of sustainable tourism concept in Japan; 2) identify the key sustainable tourism stakeholders in the study area; 3) explore how they are dealing with sustainable tourism development in the context of the macro-level health-related crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the next step of secondary data collection, the author conducted background archival research. That provided an understanding of the origins and the conditions for phenomena of research interest. Tourism development policies are documented in the charter documents and development policy. First, the author chose to explore documents from the field of tourism regulation on a national level. The purpose was to determine the context and direction of the tourism policies and define the public policy approach to sustainable tourism in Japan. The author received all the necessary documents for this study in the public domain on the official website of MLIT, Government of Japan. The author provided the documentation in Japanese and translated it into English for research needs only. The author used one tourism promotion law, three tourism promotion plans, 19 *White Paper on Tourism*, and one sustainable tourism developed project document.

After collecting secondary data with desk research, the author conducted qualitative content analysis to obtain necessary information for answering research questions. To gain a better qualitative understanding of an approach to sustainable tourism and related policies of key stakeholders in Japan, the data collected from desk research was coded according to the main themes of the research questions. The unit of meaning for coding is the treatment of sustainable tourism concept, sustainable tourism development, tourism industry response to pandemics, and epidemics. The themes and scope of analysis were determined by research questions and theoretical framework and are "sustainable tourism," "health-related crises," "tourism crisis risk management."

### **3.2 Primary data collection and analysis**

The current study has been taken during the global COVID-19 pandemic, which has put some limitations on research methods. The coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) and the subsequent forced and voluntary social distancing response have significantly impacted field research methods (Dodds & Hess, 2020). Gummer et al. (2020) note that NPIs in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic have led to severe problems for many research and scientific projects, especially those based on personal interviews. In social research, traditional qualitative methods, such as interviews, were usually conducted in person, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers were forced to adapt their research and bring it online (Dodds & Hess, 2020).

Following the purposive sampling strategy and based on the list of stakeholders, the researcher identified three main groups of informants. Namely, the prefectural governments of the Kanto region and the governments of prefectural administrative centres, DMOs in the Kanto region, and private business tourism associations in the Kanto region. Then the author prepared the initial contact message to be sent to the informants to invite them to participate in the research. After the list of targeted organizations was compiled, the author sent the initial email messages explaining the research and invitation to participate in it. After receiving the first responses, the author sent the interview survey process explanation upon the requests from the organizations. Further, the document explains the research purpose and aims in more detail, the choice of respondents, the content of questions in the questionnaire, and the link to Google forms sent to the respondents.

At the preparation stage, research protocol, research explanation, interview questions, consent form, and survey questions were created in English and then translated into Japanese to provide interviewees and interview survey participants with the best understanding of the research project. The translation into Japanese was proofread by two experts, namely a Japanese native speaker professor and a Japanese linguist with knowledge of English and Japanese languages. All interactions between interviewees and the interviewer were held in Japanese. The data gathered from interviews and surveys were in written form. Further, the interview and survey responses were thoroughly translated into English for the current study. Also, the linguist checked the translation. Translation of the raw data in Japanese was necessary to further analysis by the researcher, creating codes, and further data analysis process.

#### **4. Results and discussion**

The analysis was based on the assumption that sustainable tourism has to ensure the sustainability of the tourism industry by supporting the tourism business because an economically stable tourism industry benefits society by creating jobs and tax revenues to the national and regional budgets. Further, sustainable tourism should prioritize conservation and environmental concerns and contribute to biodiversity and cultural heritage conservation. Third, tourism must consider the local community's interests (Saarinen, 2013).

Analysis showed that sustainable tourism is a relatively new phenomenon for the Japanese government and Japan's tourism policy. The first steps to turn traditional mass tourism into a sustainable one were taken only a few years ago. And although the Japanese government has announced its intention to actively develop sustainable tourism, their understanding of the concept of sustainable tourism remains unclear. The main goal of developing measures to promote and develop sustainable tourism in Japan was the need to respond to the phenomenon of overtourism that Japan had faced in the last few years before the COVID-19 crisis.

While *Toward a Sustainable Tourism Developed Country* (MLIT, June 10, 2019) states its intention to develop sustainable tourism and move away from "good to visit" indicators in favor of benefits for local communities, the document still sets out goals to increase the number of foreign tourists. Moreover, measures for sustainable tourism development include only the prevention of possible violations of etiquette by tourists and congestion. The document only partially touches on the goals of achieving sustainable prosperity for destinations and residents.

A closer look into the official documents from the field of sustainable tourism development and the responses to email interviews and surveys provides insights of key tourism stakeholders in Japan into the sustainable concept operationalization. All the respondents are stakeholders directly involved in the development and operationalization of sustainable tourism in the Kanto region of Japan.

The interview survey results demonstrated that the overtourism issue was the least mentioned aspect in the responses. That might be a consequence of the fact that the study area of this research is the Kanto region which faced the overtourism phenomena less than the Kyoto area or did not face it at all. That leads to the conclusion that the Japanese government did not consider different aspects of sustainable tourism development frequently used worldwide and interests of all areas in Japan, but rather focused on only one problem that only one area faced.

Regarding the stakeholders' roles in sustainable tourism development, the most frequently appeared roles in respondents' responses were "tourism promotion," "area revitalization/development," "attracting tourists," and "tourism information distribution." This shows that sustainable tourism stakeholders in Japan see themselves more as providers of tourist information to visitors and developers of measures for tourism development.

Moreover, the interview survey analysis results showed that the interpretation of Japan's sustainable tourism stakeholders of sustainable tourism concept and their roles as stakeholders in sustainable tourism development has some differences with the commonly used interpretation by academics and other practitioners. Comparing the sustainable tourism concept interpretation by Japan's stakeholders and commonly used interpretation revealed some codes that appeared only in the responses of Japan's sustainable tourism stakeholders. These codes reflect the sustainable tourism concept components, which are special for stakeholders in Japan, such as "mutual understanding between tourists and local community promotion" and "educating about cultural and

religious differences.” These codes indicate the reflection of the overtourism issue in some areas in Japan that occurred before the global COVID-19 pandemic. However, the codes “responsive tourism promotion” and “destination adaptation to changes in global trends” may reflect new components which stakeholders developed under the influence of the global pandemic crisis.

Concerning the differences in the respondents’ interpretation of their roles as sustainable tourism stakeholders, the comparison results also indicated the codes that do not match the commonly used theory. Although Japan’s respondents more frequently named such roles as “tourism promotion,” “area revitalization/development,” “attracting tourists,” and “tourism information distribution,” only one of these most frequently named codes matched the stakeholders’ roles in sustainable tourism development used in the common theory. Japan’s stakeholders refer to the roles of traditional tourism development stakeholders with paying less attention to turning the tourism in their destinations into a more sustainable form. That might indicate that even though tourism stakeholders in Japan are aware of the sustainable tourism concept, they still do not fully recognize their roles in making traditional tourism sustainable.

Further, the respondents were asked several questions concerning their insights on the effect of the global pandemic on sustainable tourism development and their proposals for response measures for future sustainable tourism development and related policies. Almost 77% of respondents agreed that external factors influence the tourism industry, and 100% agreed that public health-related crises (epidemics and pandemics) impact it. Respondents named following tourism industry challenged due to the current pandemic crisis: the helplessness of the industry against pandemic, tourism transportation industry damage, accommodation industry damage, foodservice industry damage, travel companies damage, reduction of group travels, income reductions, lack of financial support from the government, difficulties in maintaining employment, operational costs increase, loose of traditional events due to cancellation, decrease in domestic and foreign tourists, uncertain future of the industry, psychological effect, and lack of crisis management.

The proposals of stakeholders for response measures for future sustainable tourism development and related policies were as follows: to strengthen cooperation between tourists and accepting communities, to conduct mass vaccination, establishment of crisis management system in tourism sphere, focus on development of domestic tourism, diversification of local industries, moving away from tourism solely, creation of proper guidelines for the tourism industry for actions in case of crisis, development of medical solutions (therapeutic drugs development), revision of traditional tourism techniques, establishment of “new lifestyle”/adaptation to “with Corona” era, focusing on online business/ tourism experience, focus on the development of small groups tours and individual tours, active cooperation between all main stakeholders, review the industry working process and related policies, strategy changes in response to changes in tourist trends, revision of the current travel business law, financial support to the industry from government, development of flexibility and adaptivity to changes in social conditions, incorporation of public health-related issues, non-contact content expansion, individual approach to different areas, and regional cooperation incorporation.

## 5. Conclusion

To date, Japan’s main public sector current approach to sustainable tourism implies resolving the issue of overtourism in main tourism destinations and providing comfortable living for local communities. However, it does not consider other sustainable tourism development aims. Moreover, it does not have any implications for making tourism more resilient to external crises, especially those caused by macro-lever pandemics and epidemics. However, private tourism industry stakeholders proposed several measures for adapting sustainable tourism to crisis and making the industry more resilient in the future. The most frequently mentioned suggestions are cooperation between tourists and accepting communities and active cooperation between all main stakeholders. The next most often-named suggestion is establishing a crisis management system for the tourism sphere and incorporating it into sustainable tourism development. Indeed this might become the next step in the evolution of the sustainable tourism concept and making the tourism in its sustainable form more sustainable and resilient to external factors.

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