



## 2021 TOP 100 GOOD PRACTICE STORY

**Title of the Story:** Sustainable landscape conservation and tourism promotion in Aso region by utilizing 1,000 year old grasslands in a creative way

**Destination Name:** *(include any state, province or region)*

**Aso city**

**Country:** Japan

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**Nomination Category:** *(Please check the boxes that indicate the focus of your story)*

*Please find detailed information for the categories below in the Top 100 training module 'Good Practice Story'.*

- Localizing the destination supply chain
- Decarbonizing the destination supply chain
- Culture & Communities
- Environment & Climate
- Nature & Ecotourism
- Tourism Reset & Recovery

*Find detailed instructions for submitting good practices in the Top 100 training module "Good Practice Story".*

*Should you have any questions on your submission please refer to our FAQ page or contact [top100@greendestinations.org](mailto:top100@greendestinations.org)*

# DESCRIBE YOUR GOOD PRACTICE STORY

*Address each aspect of your good practice story in the different sections being specific including relevant quantitative and qualitative information.*

## Issues faced

Grasslands in Aso are the largest in Japan with an area of 22,000 hectares. Based on results of soil analysis, it is a "cultural heritage," one that has been inherited for about 13,000 years through the coexistence of people and nature. However, according to "the Comprehensive Survey of Aso Grassland Preservation and Regeneration" held in 2016, grassland areas have been lost rapidly by tree planting as areas of forestland have increased by 64ha (3.1%) while those of grassland have decreased by 155ha (-3.7%).

By looking at the prospects for the continuity of activities by rural communities, which are essential for the maintenance of grasslands (according to the same survey), only 38% of the respondents expected to continue their activities for more than 10 years, while 22% of the respondents expected to continue their activities for "already difficult or discontinued" or "few years," indicating that maintaining grasslands had faced challenges.

The landscape of Aso grasslands has been recognized worldwide, and its unique resource cannot be ignored in tourism. The top three tourist resources in Aso region by TripAdvisor, the word-of-mouth travel website, are "Daikanbou," Kusakanri-ga-hama," and "Milk Road," all of which feature beautiful landscapes of the grasslands. (The three sites were selected for 2020 Travelers' Choice awards by TripAdvisor.)

Along with agriculture, tourism is a major industry in the Aso region, and a source of livelihood for people. Maintaining grasslands is not only the inheritance of an important cultural heritage, but also an important resource for employment and rising income level nowadays. Therefore, new sustainable models were needed.

## Methods, steps and tools applied

- Call for "like-minded volunteers" living in urban areas

"Volunteer supporting controlled burning" is a continuous activity since 1999. Volunteers are called from all over Japan, required to take mandatory training sessions before participating in the burning, and sent to pastures where is difficult to conduct controlled burning or to create firebreaks. At present, more than 2,500 volunteers are involved in the maintenance of grasslands on about half of the total pastures in the Aso region, with a model being created in which the "like-minded volunteers" covered the lack of workers due to the aging and depopulation of villages.

- Return on profits through grasslands activities with appropriate compensation received from tourists

A large part of the Aso grasslands is situated within the National Park area, however some areas are restricted to entry in general due to "Iriaichi" (common land). Therefore, activities in the grasslands have been planned with special entry permission in an environmentally low-impact style, provided that



they are led by local guides. The activities enable the creation of new jobs by receiving appropriate fees from tourists, while building a system that returns a portion of the tour-guiding fee to the local pastures association. The return on costs is utilized for maintaining grasslands by the association. This project has an excellent track record of achieving both tourism promotion and landscape conservation.

- PR and branding of grass-fed “Aso Akaushi “(Aso’s Japanese Brown Cattle)

Local food is an important key for tourism. As a result of promoting the grass-fed Aso Akaushi, the idea of “Aso’s local food = Aso Akaushi Beef” is well known among tourists, and the beef restaurants are so popular that bookings are quite difficult to secure even on weekdays. It is said that eating about 100g (about one serving) of beef will lead to the preservation of grassland of about 7.5 m<sup>2</sup>. Recognizing this, if Akaushi is a reason for visiting Aso along with seeing the grassland landscapes, a sustainable economic effect on a large scale could result for farmers, restaurants and accommodation facilities..

#### Key success factors

- Multi-tiered support system by diverse groups of stakeholders including government (MOE, MAFF, CAO, prefectures, cities and etc.), private enterprises and people (local residents and volunteers)

Maintenance management of native grasslands and conservation of grassland environment require long-lasting activities by diverse groups working together with a common understanding. Therefore, the public- and private-sector based “Aso Grassland Restoration Committee” was established in 2005, following procedures under the Law for the Promotion of Nature Restoration. The committee, with 262 members as of March 2021, has formulated a general plan. It also contributed to the designation as a member of the Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS) in May 2013. It also played a role in developing an atmosphere conducive for designation as one of the Community Revitalization Comprehensive Special Zone by CAO. Such movements and steady efforts by the cooperation of local residents and same-minded volunteers who contributed to the success of the maintenance and conservation of the grasslands.

#### Lessons learned

- Thorough preventive measures against animal infectious diseases (foot-and-mouth disease)

Although Aso grasslands have been maintained to use as pastures for livestock, preventive measures against animal infectious diseases such as foot-and-mouth disease become essential because of entry by visitors to the land. Therefore, thorough measures such as disinfecting with lime have been implemented as part of entry to grasslands by visitors with local guides. Moreover, sustainable models have been created by using the land when grazing is not being done and by dividing the land into sections through zoning.

- A certification system and branding of the grass-fed Aso Akaushi

With the growing popularity of Aso Akaushi beef, some food mislabeling of beef scandals occurred. To tackle this, we registered the name as “Kumamoto Akaushi” to the Geographical Indication System, and developed sustainable models to protect both consumers and farmers while maintaining a “Authorized Aso Akaushi Beef Restaurants” program and terms of use of “Logo for the GIAHS.”

- Unauthorized entry and digging in grasslands

According to the 2007 MOE Red Lists, 56 types of rare species that have been designated as



endangered (CR • EN • VU) are living in the Aso grasslands. However, there were problems with unauthorized entry and digging by some unsuspecting visitors, prompting efforts toward the protection and conservation of endangered species by conducting grassland patrols, and organizing tourism activities that require local guides.

### Results, achievements and recognitions

- Increased sustainability through volunteerism with like-minded people

A system that allows volunteers from outside the community to take part in grassland conservation activities has been established. The number of volunteers increased from 824 in 2003 to 2,306 in 2020, with the numbers on the rise since then, despite the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and other factors.

- Creation of new sustainable business models in the grasslands

There is a rise in activities that use grasslands in a sustainable method and are conducted by local guides. There are more than 10 different activities such as cycling, horseback riding, trekking, rappelling, BBQ, bonfires, yoga, stargazing and paragliding. Despite the negative impact caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, one major business alone had about 6,000 visitors, with sales of about 50 million yen in 2020. Some portions of the activity fee are donated to grassland conservation.

- Branding “Akaushi” and grassland conservation by increasing fattening of cattle

The number of head of fattening Japanese brown cattle, including Aso Akaushi mainly, in Kumamoto increased 14% to 16,300 in 2020 from the lowest count of 14,300 in 2016. Unit price of carcass of “Japanese brown cattle (female)” rose by about 85% from JPY1,318/kg in 2013 to JPY2,440/kg in 2017. Japanese brown cattle are now traded at a higher unit price than Japanese black cattle. Moreover, the number of restaurants that cooks “Akaushi beef” within Aso city increased from 15 in 2013 to 30 in 2020.

- Awards

August 2020 : Approved regional plan under the Regional Culture Tourism Promotion Law

July 2019 : Approved grand design under the Ecotourism Promotion Act

June 2019 : Agreed regional licensed guide interpreter plan by JTA under Licensed Guide Interpreters Act

February 2018 : Awarded “Excellence” at MOE Ecotourism Prize

October 2017 : Selected for National Important Cultural Landscape

December 2014 : Awarded “Special prize” at MOE Ecotourism Prize

September 2014 : Designated as UNESCO Global Geoparks

September 2013 : Designated as the Community Revitalization Comprehensive Special Zone

May 2013 : Designated for Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS)

October 2008 : Designated for Aso-Kuju Tourism Zone under Act on Promotion of Tourists

### Additional references



- Report of Aso Grasslands Conservation Support System
- Case studies of controlled burn volunteer's activity and tour-experience utilizing grasslands (Pictures)
- Outlines for establishment of Aso Grassland Restoration Committee
- Aso Grassland Regeneration Grand Design (Overview)
- Inheritance of 1,000 year old grasslands and Creative Use Comprehensive Special Zone Plan
- Akaushi Owner Program
- Authorized Aso Akaushi Beef Restaurants Program
- Grand design of Aso Ecotourism Promotion (Overview)
- Training program for Aso Regional Licensed Guide interpreters
- Activity reports of training program for Aso Regional Licensed Guide interpreters (Overview)
- Regional plan for promoting culture and tourism featuring Aso Geopark base facilities as the central role. (overview)
- MOE Ecotourism Prize (Received special and excellent awards)