

Monitoring Trends among Visitor Groups in National Parks —The Kamikochi Case Study—

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1. Introduction. Although some 60% of the total area of over 2 million hectares of national parkland in Japan is owned by the Forestry Agency, in practice management plans and policy are drawn up and implemented by the Ministry of Environment (MoE). However, due to a relatively short history, lack of funding and manpower, it is only in recent years that the MoE has introduced monitoring techniques comparable to the US VERP system (1993), whose roots extend back to the 1960s. The 1999 trail counters installed on Yakushima by Professor Hirata from Kagoshima University were among the first to be tested in Japan. Suitably impressed, the MoE took over their joint management in 2001 and since then the number of counters has spread rapidly across the country, including Kamikochi, the Southern gateway to the Chubu Sangaku National Park, an IUCN category II protected area.

2. Selection of Case Study Area. However, despite the increasing number of trail counters, doubts remain over their accuracy and integration into a comprehensive park management plan (Aikoh, 2005). A review of available literature implied a lack of sustained monitoring at Kamikochi that belied its status as a top-flight destination (Jones, 2007). Moreover, doubts surround the accuracy of even the most fundamental data sources including the intake of daily visitors (Akihara, 2001).

3. Methodology. The Green Diamond plan, implemented by the MoE in 1995, aimed to meet the diversifying needs of new types of use. Specifically, the 3-way zoning blueprint set out to renovate the facilities in and around the core zone in order to accommodate the most common types of visitor to Kamikochi: ① a central area was set aside to accommodate large numbers of visitors without overt congestion; ② a buffer zone for more comprehensive interaction with the natural environment; ③ and the back country mountainside beyond. In order to gauge the flow of visitors around these three management zones, passive infrared trail counters were installed in 2006 at 3 corresponding locations. The primary aim is to compile the data from these 3 counters and test their accuracy.

4. Results & Observations. Kamikochi is a much-loved national park gateway that receives visitors from all across Japan and, increasingly, from abroad. Nevertheless, the importance of accurate data and regular monitoring cannot be overestimated given the fact that claims of 'overuse' still persist in some circles while conversely entrance figures point to a gradual decline in visitor numbers in recent years.

References

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