Ecotourism on Iriomote Island
~ Past, present, future~

Akiko Ishigaki, chairperson of the Iriomote Island Ecotourism Association
Representative of Kuuru Koubou
Location of Iriomote Island

- Approximately 430 km further southwest from Okinawa Island
- It belongs to the Yaeyama Islands group centered on Ishigaki Island
Area of approximately 290 km$^2$ (the second largest island in the prefecture after Okinawa Island)

Subtropical climate, island environment, unique ecosystem

Approximately 90% forest (subtropical laurel forest, mangrove forests)

Population of approximately 2,300 people

The major industries are agriculture, livestock farming, and tourism

Administratively the island is a part of the town of Taketomi in Yaeyama District

Approximately 280,000 tourists visit the island annually (2012)
Natural resources of Iriomote Island

Subtropical plants such as mangroves, etc.

Subtropical forests and geographical features such as waterfalls, etc.

Rare creatures

Coral reefs and diverse marine organisms
Cultural resources of Iriomote Island

Customs associated with rice growing

Festivals

Lifestyle and culture such as dyed fabrics, folk handcrafts, etc.

Folk performing arts such as dance, folk songs, etc.
History of Iriomote Island ecotourism and the association

- 1991: “Study of Measures to Promote Nature Experience Activities" by the Environmental Agency
- 1994: Ecotourism Guidebook “Yamana Kara Suna Pito” published
- 1996: Iriomote Island Ecotourism Association launched
- 2002: Iriomote Island Ecotourism Center established
  - 1999: Won the Home Affairs Minister’s Prize for Region Building
  - 2000: Won the Environmental Agency Director-General’s Prize for Persons who have Made Outstanding Contributions to the Natural Environment
  - 2005: Won the Special Prize in the First Ecotourism Awards
- 2010: The association became an NPO

From the second half of the 1990s~ a boom in eco-tours and canoe tours
Decline in the number of tourists
(at the peak time: 400,000, 2011: 250,000, 2012: 280,000)
Due to multiple factors such as the cooling off of the Okinawa boom, the appreciation of the yen, disparities with airfares to other isolated islands, etc. Sole proprietors offering accommodation are in a serious situation.

Most tourism is still transitory mass tourism (day trips)
There is no data regarding the number of people staying overnight on the island in recent years but it is estimated that 10% to 20% of tourists get accommodation.

Even among single travelers the proportion only going for a day trip is increasing
Most eco tour operators and operators providing other activities are shifting in the direction of targeting day trippers.
Canoe & trekking tours
(it is estimated that 80%~90% of the customers for these tours are day trippers)

- From about 2000 onwards the number of operators and tour customers rapidly increased
- Number of operators: 34 members of the Iriomotejima Canoe Association and 20 to 30 non-members (estimated)
- Tours are concentrated on the Pinaisara Falls
- In recent years the field has expanded to the Nishita River, Yutsun River, Nakara River, etc.

Diving

- Number of operators: 23 (all of them belong to the Taketomi Diving Association)
- There are many good diving spots, primarily in the north and west of the island, so at the present time excessive concentration in specific fields is not being seen
- Some damage to the coral caused by crown-of-thorns starfish is being seen but the association is undertaking systematic and continuous starfish eradication activities.

Snorkeling

- Number of operators: about 10 (the Iriomote Island Snorkelling Council was launched a few years ago)
- Previously diving operators ran snorkeling but in recent years the number of operators specializing in snorkeling has been increasing
Boast the highest drop (55 m) of any waterfall in Okinawa Prefecture
More than 100 canoes at peak times
The number of canoeists is regulated by the voluntary rules of the Iriomotejima Canoe Association
Monopolization of the field by the canoe association
Activities of the Iriomote Island Ecotourism Association

~ Iriomote Island where people and nature live in harmony ~

- Environmental preservation
- Environmental education
- Handing down culture
- Eco-tourism

Most of the activities are subsidy projects or commissioned projects so the proportions of each type of activities change substantially in each fiscal year.
Lecture meetings and workshops

- **Lecture & workshop by Kiku Ezaki, the ecotourism promotion advisor for the Ministry of the Environment**
  March 2012, December 2012
  (Ministry of the Environment subsidy)

- **Lecture meetings**
  "The Future of Iriomote Island Considered in light of the Act on Promotion of Ecotourism"
  November 2012
  (National Council for Region Building subsidy)

- **Natural energy workshop**
  Fiscal year 2010, fiscal year 2011, and fiscal year 2012
  (Japan Fund for Global Environment subsidy)
Training guides and certifying guides

- **Development of a curriculum for the guide certification system**
  - Fiscal year 2010 and fiscal year 2011
  - (project commissioned by the town of Taketomi)

- **Safety control lecture meeting/workshop**
  - Fiscal year 2011
  - (Commissioned by the Ministry of the Environment)
Okinawa Prefecture Project to Develop World-Class Human Resources for Tourism

January ~ February 2013

- Prior training “Regional guide and coordinator basic training”
  In Toba City, Mie Prefecture
- First training “Training to develop masters of Iriomote Island hospitality”
- Second training “Training for receiving foreign travelers and language training”
Environmental preservation activities

- Beach cleanups
  Organized by the Iriomote Eco Project
  Held every month

- Coral reef preservation activities
  - Reef checks
    Organized by diving team Unarizaki
  - Eradication of crown-of-thorns starfish
  - Coral identification workshop
    (Home appliance and housing eco points)

- Monitoring
  - 1,000 Ministry of the Environment monitoring sites
  - Monitoring of Nakama River

- Gathering and sharing information about living creatures

- Soap Promotion Project
Environmental education program

- Accepting trainees
  - JICA
  - University students (Tokai University, University of Tsukuba, etc.)

- Program coordination
  - Okinawa Prefecture Isolated Islands Experience and Exchange Project (Fiscal year 2011, fiscal year 2012)
  - Doshisha University Empowerment Program (February 2013)

- Eco-Tourism Summer Vacation Children's Week

- Development and revision of a natural environmental education curriculum
Island People’s Cultural Festival
Every 2 ~ 3 years
(Agency for Cultural Affairs subsidy)

Hands-on training session (making folk handicrafts)
(Agency for Cultural Affairs/Bank of Okinawa subsidy)

Handing down and disseminating children’s songs, folk songs, dance, ancient songs, classical drumming
(Agency for Cultural Affairs subsidy)

Tachikuri Course

Participation in festivals
Unjami Ocean Festival with Haarii dragon boats
Tradition, creativity, and succession

The residents of Iriomote Island have led lives nurtured by nature since ancient times. This multifaceted event presents the traditional culture handed down over the generations by the residents of the island, introduces the wide variety of cultural activities that people carry out in the regions, and at the same time attempts to communicate new culture.

5th: November 18 ~ 20, 2011
6th: Planned for November 16, 2013
5th Island People's Cultural Festival

Display and sale of handicrafts

Hands-on toy-making for children

Natural Energy Yuntaku Meeting

Bazaar offering delicious food from the island
Classical drumming

Children’s songs

Audience

Traveling home to sing folk songs
Eco Market (eco-tourism market)
Flea market, market for hand-made goods, market for delicious food, hands-on experience corner

Activities to support reconstruction after the Great East Japan Earthquake
- Let’s send brown sugar to Tohoku! Our major mission
- Reconstruction support handbill “Sukesakita”

Committees and meetings
- Okinawa Prefecture Coastal Garbage Countermeasures Promotion Council
- Iriomote Natural Recreational Forest Executive Committee
- Forest Ecosystem Conservation Area Preservation Management Committee
- Iriomote Island Council for the Promotion of Appropriate Pet Breeding
- Natural Environmental Education Curriculum Liaison Conference
第3回エコツー市場
エコ市 開催！

日時：12月2日（日）10:00～15:00
場所：西表島エコツーリズムセンター（浦内）

てづくり市
布小物？陶器？
竹ぼうき？
何があるかは
お楽しみ！

リサイクル品
フリー
マーケット

お気軽に
どうぞ

うまいもの市
西表牛、じゅーレー
かマイ、スイーツ
新鮮野菜など…
を予定

体験コーナー
指ハブをつくろう！
13:00～ 無料

出店者募集中！
お問い合わせください

主催・問合せ：西表島エコツーリズム協会 85-6331

Eco Market
Eco-Tourism Children’s Week
Activities more focused on the regions

- Dissemination of "ecotourism" reflecting the original intention
  - Holding of the Eco Market and Children's Week
  - Transmission of information to the regions
  - Activities in collaboration with various organizations in the regions (community centers, women’s groups, youth organizations, schools, associations)
Initiatives going forward

- Improving the quality of guides and introducing a guide certification system
  - Initiatives in which governments, business operators, and experts work together

- Development of programs utilizing cultural resources
  - Add “culture” to the existing image that “Iriomote = the great outdoors"

- Consider the possibility of world natural heritage registration
  - The residents take the lead is establishing and sharing a vision of the future island
Iriomote Island 100 years in the future

Harmonious co-existence of people and nature

Richness of spirit

Correctly communicate the value of the island

A charming tourism area that utilizes its individuality

Akiko Ishigaki