



# **Sustainable Tourism Region Development Action Plan ver.1 Aso City, Kumamoto Japan**

Published by Aso Caldera Tourism Promotion Council  
on January 31, 2024



## -Theme/Vision- Why do we aim for "Sustainable Tourism"?

Aso Caldera, one of the largest calderas in the world, holds Japan's largest grassland, the "Millennium Grassland," which has been passed down by people living in harmony with nature for more than 1,000 years. The "Millennium Grassland," a precious treasure of Aso, is indispensable for agriculture such as grazing and for tourism in Aso. And also the studies have shown that the grasslands function as a habitat for rare fauna and flora, a groundwater recharging, and a carbon fixing. According to the latest study, the grasslands fix carbon as much as 1.7 times the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> emitted by all the households in Aso Region in a year. Aso's "Millennium Grassland" is a true symbol of sustainability. Accordingly, we will formulate the Aso Sustainable Action Plan in order to pass down this "Millennium Grassland" for the next thousand years, and practice the sustainable tourism community development based on the circulation model of "Benefits for all three sides"(nature, community, tourists) as those who are involved in tourism and receive the benefits of the "Millennium Grassland" in Aso.

### Image of the circulation model of "Benefits for all three sides"



Aso City aims to be a sustainable tourism region with the circulation model of "Benefits for all three sides" (nature/community/tourist)

# Aso City's previous approaches to develop a sustainable tourism region

May 2013



**“Maintenance of Aso grasslands and sustainable agriculture” was approved as GIAHS**

The Aso region was recognized by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) as a Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Site (GIAHS) for "Maintenance of Aso Grasslands and Sustainable Agriculture" in recognition of various efforts over the years by people to maintain and circulate the beautiful grasslands.

Sep. 2014



**Designation as a UNESCO Global Geopark**

The conservation and research of local resources as well as the education programs and ecotourism utilizing those resources, under the theme of "Volcanic Landscape and Human Life in Aso" were highly appreciated by UNESCO.



June 2019

**Start up of the Aso area Licensed Guide Interpreter system**

Aso City started a training system for professional guides to interpret for foreign tourists about the nature and culture of Aso in English.

July 2019

**Approval of Aso Ecotourism Promotion Concept**

Aso Geopark Promotion Council was deemed to be a legal council under the Ecotourism Promotion Law for the purpose of local revitalization (to draw more visitors) and appropriate promotion (ex. to protect natural resources.).Deregulation of the Road Transportation Vehicle Act was applied according to the approval of the Aso Ecotourism Promotion Plan.

August 2020

**Designation by the Agency for Cultural Affairs as “ Regional plan based on the Cultural Tourism Promotion Act.**

Regional Plan for the promotion of cultural tourism based on the Aso Geopark facilities was approved to promote the culture and tourism in Aso and develop a unique and vibrant local community.

Dec. 2021

**Formulation of sustainable tourism guidelines utilizing the millennium grasslands**

The guidelines for activity tour guides to pass down the millennium grasslands to the next generation were formulated.



Sep. 2022



**Selected as one of the Green Destinations Top 100 for 2 consecutive years.**

The landscape conservation and tourism community development of Aso was selected as one of the Green destination top 100 by Green Destinations, an international certification organization for sustainable tourism destinations for two consecutive years from 2021, for its sustainable conservations and utilizations of the "Millennium Grasslands".



May 2023

**Selected as a model region for the “ Model Project for Promoting Sustainable Tourism in 2023” by Japan Tourism Agency**

Oct. 2023



**Awarded the grand prize in the Japan Tourism Agency's "Sustainable Travel AWARD"**

A travel product of Aso Onsen Tourism Ryokan Cooperative Organization ,which take tourists to Aso grasslands by electric bicycles with special permission won the grand prize.

# Previous efforts and future goals of the " Model Project for Promoting Sustainable Tourism in 2023" by Japan Tourism Agency



## (1) Basic introductory training - Sustainable tourism strategies for accommodation facilities -

An introductory seminar was held in person for about 40 companies who are interested in and keen to sustainable tourism, with Professor Hidetoshi Kobayashi from Hokkaido University's Center for Advanced Studies in Tourism, to motivate them to take on this project as part of their own business and develop it as their "own business". Mr. Kobayashi explained the procedures for starting sustainable operations regarding to the case studies of other regions. The participants got confidence by realizing that the activities they usually do in Aso City can be sustainable if they look at it from another prospective.



## (2) Seminars held- To know what we can do for eco-friendly cost reduction

Mr. Suguru Takayama, Representative Director of JARTA, showed that developing sustainable tourism can lead to cost reductions, as well as to profit making for the companies. He also introduced the criteria of the international eco-label "Green Key," and gave guidance on what specific efforts should be made for example how to save water and electricity at the actual water and electricity facilities of actual accommodation.



## (3) Meeting to review the contents of Action Plan for next year and after

Seminars and workshops were held for accommodation businesses to review the sustainable activities (Action Plans) of their own accommodation and surrounding areas as their "own business." The participants discussed in groups how to expand local sustainable activities (direction, etc.) and made presentations (refer to below for details). The participants filled out a draft action plan for the next three years, and they are supposed to consult with their own employees to make it a practical action plan. The meeting was adjourned with the plan to report the progress in one month.



### The contents discussed at the workshop

#### -Direction of the sustainable practices to obtain the certification in next year and after

As for the purpose of obtaining the certification, many participants agreed that it would help create a local brand. Some said that the certification of OTA's Eco Mark brought more European and American customers indeed, then they commented it would help to attract more customers. Most of the participants are tourism-related businesses, agreed to aim for "creating a sustainable community which is attractive for children" and they want to be "the one to lead it with the support of local governments" in the future, although the current situation is "led by local governments and the tourism-related businesses are following. The awareness of recognition is emerging that both the local government and tourism-related businesses should work together to create a community where meet the requirements for certification. Regarding the process for obtaining certification, the method which allows the motivated accommodations to work together on common basic criteria was consented. It will help to show the high environmental awareness in the Aso region. Beyond that, each of the accommodations will make effort and challenge with the utilization of their own strengths. Although there were a few opinions that the Aso Onsen Tourism Ryokan Cooperative Organization should take the lead for all the accommodations in the region, the majority agreed it would be more realistic to start with the motivated accommodations at first. In the end, it was agreed that this project wouldn't be accomplished without the cooperation of employees, so the recognition was shared that it is important to discuss with employees from the early stage to gain their understanding and cooperation. The draft proposal is supposed to be discussed with employees at each accommodations.

## Aso City Accommodation Businesses 21 Sustainable Action Plans ver.1

### ■ Action Plans inside the accommodation facilities

1. We will use low food-mileage foods produced in Aso or Kumamoto, for example the vegetables, rice, and other agricultural products were cultivated with Aso grass compost fertilizer, and grassfed Aso Akaushi beef as much as possible.
2. We will serve the tasty water produced by Aso grasslands in a low-environmental-impact way, such as by jugs, bottles, and water servers.
3. When renovating facilities, we will utilize LED lighting, energy-saving air conditioners and heaters, energy-saving window glass and sashes, etc. We will also save energy such as electricity and gas by supervising lighting ,air conditioning, etc. in the facilities strictly.
4. With an awareness of reducing waste, we will make efforts to reduce food loss by providing a proper amount of food to the guests and use the left food materials at the employee's cafeteria. And also we will promote to separate and reduce the waste, reduce the use of disposable plastics for amenities, encourage the guests to bring their own amenities, reuse and recycle the resources etc.,
5. For the guests staying more than 2 nights, we will offer the option of no change of bed linens, towels, and room wears, and no cleaning of their rooms. If they choose no change their bed linens or no cleaning of their rooms, some of their accommodation fees will be donated to grassland conservation activities.
6. For linen cleaning, we will select a cleaning businesses, which is close and use less chemical detergents.
7. We will practice the Green Purchasing strictly when we purchase consumable items such as toilet paper, tissues, and copy paper.
8. For souvenir sales, we will cooperate with our suppliers for avoiding over-packaging.
9. We will promote the use of hybrid car and electric vehicles for business purposes. We will also make sure to advise our guests to use public transportation, rental bikes, etc.
10. We will use the plants native to this area as the plants on our properties.
11. We will promote universalization by developing both hardware and software for the accessibility and multilingualization.
12. We will "visualize" the amount of greenhouse gases produced from the guests' stay at the accommodation, and also explain the carbon fixation effect of the grasslands. Then, we will give them an option of offsetting their CO2 emissions by donating to the grasslands conservation fee.



## Aso City Accommodation Businesses 21 Sustainable Action Plans ver.1

### ■ Action Plans for whole area in Aso City

13. We will contribute to the agriculture and livestock farming by supporting the livestock farmers who graze the cattle on the grasslands of Aso, the organic farmers who use the fertilizer made from Aso grass actively.
14. We will contribute to the sustainable conservation and restoration of Aso "Millennium Grasslands" by using the garden plants which are native to Aso area and supporting grassland conservation activities directly and indirectly .
15. For the contribution to pass on the history and culture of this area, we will use the traditional handicraft products at facilities, introduce and sell them as souvenirs to tourists, and actively promote information about volcanic worships in Aso, agricultural rituals, and Kagura ,the Shinto music and dance etc.
16. We will actively hire and utilize not only the local human resources but also the foreigners, people come back or move to this area in the right places.

### ■ Action Plans for the area around accommodations and Onsen town

17. We will develop more business with smaller and medium-sized local businesses than with big or outside affiliated companies. We will also work to arrange local products, local ingredients, local sake and wine etc.
18. We will encourage the drivers and guests who use the chartered buses and private cars to reduce noise and car exhaust by no idling.
19. We will promote cleaning, landscape beautification, flower planting activities, not only around the facilities but also in the whole district.
20. We will hold activities regularly (e.g., discount services for local residents) to have a chance to let them know about the businesses and services of our facilities.
21. We will provide opportunities for local students from local schools to have field trips and facility tours.

## **[Appendix] Action to be certified in the "Green Key" international eco-label for accommodation facilities**

In 2023, Aso City considered the details of sustainable activities with reference to the criteria of the international eco-label "Green Key" is a certification scheme which is directed by the Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE) in Denmark. They evaluate and confirm the environmental policy and sustainable operation of accommodation facilities of various sizes, from hotels to campgrounds, with their strict criteria. The participants of the seminar held this year discussed and chose some criteria which they can practice specifically to be approved. We will keep working on obtaining international standards so that we can preserve the grasslands of Aso and become a sustainable tourism area.



### **(1) ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT**

- The management must be involved and must appoint an environmental manager from amongst the staff of the establishment.
- The establishment must formulate a sustainability policy.
- The establishment must formulate objectives and an annual action plan for continuous improvement.
- The establishment establishes active collaboration with relevant local stakeholders.
- The establishment calculates its carbon footprint using a carbon measurement tool.
- The establishment sets a concrete target to reduce its carbon footprint.
- The establishment offers its guests a possibility to compensate their emissions through a carbon scheme.

### **(2) STAFF INVOLVEMENT**

- The management holds periodic meetings with the staff to brief them on issues concerning existing and new environmental initiatives.
- The environmental manager must participate in meetings with management for the purpose of presenting the environmental developments of the establishment.
- Staff members must receive yearly training on environmental and other sustainability issues.
- The housekeeping service must know and accept the procedures regarding change of towels and sheets.
- Information is displayed in the staff area to promote responsible behaviour.
- The establishment provides its staff with the opportunity to evaluate its environmental and/or socio-cultural performance.

### **(3) WATER**

- The total water consumption must be registered at least once a month.
- Newly purchased toilets have a 3/6 litres dual flush.
- The staff must have a system in place to regularly check for dripping taps and leaky toilets.
- Water flow in at least 75% of the showers must not exceed 9 litres per minute.
- Water flow in at least 75% of the taps must not exceed 8 litres per minute.
- Urinals have sensors, water saving devices, or are water-free.
- Newly purchased cover or tunnel dishwashers do not consume more water than 3.5 litres per basket.
- Newly purchased dishwashers and laundry machines are not conventional domestic appliances.
- A grease trap is installed.

### **(4) WASHING AND CLEANING**

- There must be information in the rooms informing guests about the routine regarding the change of sheets.
- There must be information in the rooms informing guests about the routine regarding the change of towels.
- At least 75% of the chemical cleaning products for daily use have a recognised eco-label.
- Disinfection substances must only be used when necessary.
- Paper towels, facial tissues and toilet paper must be made of non-chlorine bleached paper or awarded with an eco-label.
- The establishment offers its guests the option to forego housekeeping/cleaning of the rooms.

## (5) WASTE

- The establishment must separate waste as per national legislation but with a minimum of three categories.
- The separated waste must be handled separately by the local or national waste management facilities, by a private entity or by the establishment's own facilities.
- Instructions on how to separate and handle waste must be readily available to the staff in an understandable and simple format.
- Newly purchased pumps and refrigeration plants must not use CFC or HCFC refrigerants. All equipment must always comply with national legislation on phasing out refrigerants.
- Single-use tableware products related to food/beverage must not be used.
- Hazardous solid and liquid chemicals are stored safely.
- Hazardous waste must be transported safely to an approved reception facility.
- Each bathroom has a waste bin.
- A maximum of five food/beverage products are in individually packaged single servings.
- The establishment registers the total amount of waste.
- Toiletries such as soap, shampoo and shower gel are provided in dispensers.
- The packaging of travel-sized toiletries such as soap, shampoo and shower gel is being recycled, made of recycled plastic, eco- labelled or is biodegradable.
- Toiletries, vanity kits and other single-use amenities for guests are only available on request.
- At least five types of products are delivered in reusable packaging that is returned to the supplier.
- Guests and staff are able to separate waste into categories that can be handled by the waste management facilities.
- At least 75% of the soap, shower gel and shampoo have a nationally or internationally recognised eco-label.
- At least five purchased products are either not packaged in plastic or packaged in plastic containing at least 50% recycled plastic.
- Organic waste is composted or used for other purposes.

## (6) ENERGY

- Energy use must be registered at least once a month.
- Heating, ventilation, and air- conditioning control systems must be in place.
- At least 75% of all light bulbs are energy efficient and at least 50% of all light bulbs are LED bulbs.
- Grease filters in the exhaust must be cleaned at least once a year.
- The heating, ventilation and air- conditioning system must be checked at least once a year and maintained, if necessary, in order to be energy efficient at all times.
- Refrigerators, cold stores, heating cupboards and ovens must be equipped with intact door seals.
- Freezing equipment must be regularly defrosted.
- Newly purchased mini bars must not have an energy consumption exceeding 1 kWh/day.
- There is a written procedure regarding energy in empty guest and meeting rooms.
- The establishment has set a standard temperature for cooling and heating in rooms.
- Newly purchased electronic devices in guest rooms are energy efficient.
- Outside lighting is minimised and/or has automatic turn off sensors installed.
- Newly purchased electric devices in the establishment are energy efficient.
- The establishment has an automatic system that turns off the lights and electrical appliances when leaving the guest/meeting room.
- At least 75% of the lighting in public areas and staff areas has motion detectors or is reduced when people are not present.
- A heat recovery system for e.g. refrigeration systems, ventilators, swimming pools or sanitary wastewater is installed.
- The establishment offers access to charge electric vehicles.
- The establishment does not use or only uses environmentally friendly outdoor heating or air- conditioning appliances.



## ( 7 ) FOOD AND BEVERAGE

- The establishment must purchase and register at least five types of food/beverage products that are organic, eco-labelled, fair-trade labelled and/or locally produced.
- The establishment does not buy products derived from threatened or protected species.
- A vegetarian/vegan alternative menu is offered in the restaurant.
- The establishment takes initiatives to reduce the level of food waste.
- Where the water quality is of an adequate standard, tap water is offered and/or promoted to guests.
- The establishment indicates on the menu or in the buffet the products that are organic, eco-labelled, fair-trade labelled and/or locally produced.

## ( 8 ) GREEN AREAS

- Chemical pesticides and fertilisers must not be used unless there is no organic or natural equivalent.
- Newly purchased lawnmowers must either be electrically driven, be manually driven, or be awarded with an eco-label.
- Flower and garden watering procedures are in place to save water.
- The establishment is taking initiatives to protect and support the local biodiversity on the premises of the establishment.
- The establishment only purchases native species of flora and fauna and actively eradicates invasive alien species from its premises.

## ( 9 ) OTHERS

- The establishment provides access for people with additional needs.
- The establishment is equitable in hiring women and local minorities, including in management positions.
- The establishment offers the means for local small entrepreneurs to develop and sell sustainable products that are based on the area's nature, history, and culture.
- The establishment does not offer entertainment which involves domesticated or wild animals.
- If the establishment keeps animals on its premises, animal welfare guidelines must be followed.
- The establishment formulates a sustainable purchasing policy.
- Information about nearby parks, landscape and nature conservation areas must be available to the guests.
- The establishment must provide information about the nearest place to rent or borrow bicycles.
- The guests can borrow or rent bicycles from the establishment.
- The establishment provides awareness raising activities for its guests focused on sustainable development, the environment and nature within the premises or the local community.
- Third-party operated shops and businesses located on the premises of the establishment must be informed about Green Key and the sustainability initiatives of the establishment and be encouraged to manage their activities in the same spirit.
- A minimum of 75% of the purchases of printing paper, envelopes and printed material produced or ordered by the establishment is eco-labelled or produced by a company with an environmental management system.
- The establishment informs its suppliers about its sustainability commitments and strongly encourages the suppliers to follow the same sustainability commitments.
- At least three product categories of purchased or rented textiles are environmentally friendly.
- If the laundry service is outsourced to an external company, this company is located within 100 km from the establishment.
- The establishment uses environmentally friendly motorised vehicles.
- Vehicles entering the establishment are not idling for more than two minutes.
- The use of environmentally friendly means of transportation by the staff is encouraged.

[Reference] Green Key <https://jarta.org/greenkey/>



[Published] Aso Caldera Tourism Promotion Council

[Contact] Aso City Economic Department Tourism Division +81-967-22-3174

[External experts] Professor Hidetoshi Kobayashi from Hokkaido University's Center for Advanced Studies in Tourism  
Mr. Suguru Takayama, Representative Director of JARTA