

Itoigawa Geopark in a Post-COVID-19 World: Current Situation and Issues

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1. Itoigawa Geopark Council, 2. Fossa Magna Museum

1 Background

The Itoigawa Geopark Council is an organization which is the management body of the Itoigawa UNESCO Global Geopark. It is comprised of 34 organizations including local councils, tourist associations, private companies and government agencies.

2 Effects of Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19)

COVID-19 has effected the activities of Itoigawa UNESCO Global Geopark in many ways, becoming an opportunity to effect radical change in direction and ways of thinking as we prepare for a

“Post-COVID-19 World.” April 2020 and January 2021 were marked by declarations of emergency in the Greater Tokyo Area as well as other regions around Japan. As governments urged citizens to stay indoors, it essentially restricted movement between regions, greatly reducing the visitors to Itoigawa. In particular, foreign tourism was devastated and regular programs performed with our Sister Geopark in Hong Kong, including exchange programs, could not be conducted. Many popular conferences, workshops and events were postponed or cancelled. Also, many local businesses have suffered reduced visitors and face closure or insolvency when government relief is not enough.

3 Activities during the Pandemic

We have continued Geopark Activities during the pandemic through enforcing infection prevention measures which balance social conditions as well as the needs of local residents. The following are a few examples:

- (1) Promotion of school trips (partnership with travel agencies, promotion)
- (2) Use of the Itoigawa Geopark Logo and Mascots to share prevention information (social distancing, mask usage, etc.)
- (3) Improved online content (geopark scenery and experience videos, virtual museum tour, papercrafts, origami, coloring pages, etc.)
- (4) Use of Webinars and Online Meetings (online lectures, online tours and experiences, exchange with Hong Kong, Japanese Geoparks Network [JGN] Online Conference)
- (5) Improved communication (website, social media, newsletters)

With regard to the school field trips, we have focused on attracting school trips from within Niigata and neighboring prefectures starting in spring of 2020. As a result, between the months of September and November when the infection rate was low, the Fossa Magna Museum saw a total of 3,444 students from 51 schools, an increase of 70% compared to previous years. The reasons for this increase include schools are avoiding large cities, the Geopark's ability to adjust to each school's needs, and the Geopark's value as a compact destination for earth science education. With increased usage of work-from-home programs and online meetings, new programs and activities have become possible, including new exchange meetings with Hong Kong, the Japanese Geoparks Network and the Asia Pacific Geoparks Network.

4 Geopark Activities in a Post-COVID-19 World

After the pandemic subsides, a quick rebound is hoped to be achieved in the fields of academics, tourism and economic development through a mixture of both pre- and post-COVID activities. Geopark activities like geotours and field trips, are mostly operated by the Geopark Tourist Guide Society, which has ceased

activities until April 2021. Because of this, the motivation of guides has decreased significantly. Some comments heard include “COVID-19 is scary, but I want to guide,” “I haven’ t guided in so long, I don’ t know if I want to anymore.” Itoigawa Geopark Council has joined the society’ s board meetings since autumn 2020 to help the society develop new online tours and programs, improve existing tours including the walking tour of the site of the Itoigawa City Station North Fire (28 Dec 2016, 147 buildings lost), as well as producing new guide manuals for individual sites within the Geopark.

Pandemics have a revolutionary effect on lifestyles and social structures. We must continue working closely with JGN and other organizations to meet the needs of a Post-COVID-19 World, with a focus on safety, communication and a shift from centralization to decentralization.

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