

Looking back on the 10 years of the Itoigawa UNESCO Global Geopark

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Itoigawa was certified a Japanese Geopark in December 2008 and a Global Geopark in August 2009. It currently operates as the Itoigawa UNESCO Global Geopark (hereafter ‘Itoigawa Geopark’). 2018 marks Itoigawa’ s 10th anniversary as a Japanese Geopark—10 years of new experiences made possible through Geopark Activities.

Itoigawa City encompasses a region of topography, geology and related culture and history of outstanding global value. In 1987, the Fossa Magna Regional Development Plan was implemented to make use of these geological and topographical resources for the purpose of economic development. It was this Geopark-style experience that led Itoigawa to strive for Global Geopark Certification in 2007.

Itoigawa’ s Kotaki District can be given as a leading example of Geopark-led regional development. While the Kotaki District features exceptionally important geological heritage sites including the Kotakigawa Jade Gorge and Takanami-no-Ike Pond, it is also a very aged community with most residents over retirement age. To participate in Geopark Activities, the community has put on Geopark Lectures and the Kotaki Total GeoTour with the support of students from Niigata University. They have also engaged in cultural exchange programs with Geoparks in Taiwan. These experiences have helped to breathe new life and energy into the community. Through these ventures, the regional resources have increased in value and the Kotaki District has become more appealing to visitors. Their example has sent waves through other communities in Itoigawa, changing their attitudes toward regional development.

We have also worked to develop new generations of people who understand the importance of sustainable development and who will shape the future society in Itoigawa and Japan. In 2010 we helped implement the “0 to 18 Children’ s Unified Education Policy” which includes Geopark Studies at every stage of development. The Geopark Certification Exam, held yearly since 2009, encourages continuing education and interest in Itoigawa and the Geopark Model. The fruits of their research are used to improve regional development efforts.

To develop and make use of Geotourism, we have implemented the following measures. To coincide with the opening of the Hokuriku Shinkansen High-speed Railway Line in 2018, we renovated the Fossa Magna Museum and built a new Visitor’ s Center, the Itoigawa GeoStation GeoPal. We’ ve also developed new bus tours of various geosites and a special tour which visits the Maikomidaira Karst Region. We’ ve created the Itoigawa Geopark Tour Guide Society, which helps us regulate and better make use of our Geopark tour guides. In addition to their guide work, members also participate in regional development activities. Since becoming a UNESCO Global Geopark, Itoigawa has also seen an increase in foreign tourists. Since 2016, a special seafood-themed shuttle bus has been operated each winter for foreign visitors.

In 2010 we began the Geopark Master Lectures, aimed at local restaurant and hotel staff. Through this program, we have improved our relationship with local businesses and we have seen business use the Itoigawa Geopark brand more through the creation of Geopark-themed menus and other products. A local business association, the “Itoigawa Umaimonkai,” has developed new local foods including “Itoigawa

Black Yakisoba” (2010), the “Itoigawa Geopark Rice Bowls” (2013), and a special menu promoting *megisu* deep-sea smelt, a local specialty (2017). The local Kaiyo High School has used their school’ s career training program to develop and market new products using local seafood as a way of contributing to the regional economy.

In December 2016, strong winds fed a fire north of Itoigawa Station which soon spread out of control, consuming a large area. Through the efforts of the Itoigawa Geopark, we were able to explain to prefectural and national officials the unique topography and climate conditions in Itoigawa that led to this fire growing as quickly as it did. As a result, it was classified as a natural disaster and made eligible for special recovery funds. Itoigawa’ s Hayakawa District is home to Mt. Yakeyama, an active volcano. Through Geopark Studies, we work with the city, Meteorological Agency, and local residents to promote disaster readiness and risk reduction.

In the United Nations, Sustainable Development Goals (Sustainable Development Goals: SDGs) towards 2030 was formulated. The Itoigawa Geopark would like to continue using the Geopark Network and to work with local people in a bottom-up approach through Geopark Activities in order to promote regional sustainability.

Keywords: Itoigawa city, Itoigawa UNESCO Global Geopark, Geopark, Sustainable Development Goals