

Look back on the 10 years at the statistical data of the Itoigawa UNESCO Global Geopark

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Itoigawa was designated a Global Geopark in August 2009 and continues activities as the Itoigawa UNESCO Global Geopark today. This paper is a retrospective of the past 10 years of the Itoigawa Geopark, through analysis of statistical data related to tourist sites and geopark activities.

Itoigawa City first implemented the “Fossa Magna and Regional Development Plan” in 1987 to make use of the region’s geological and topographical heritage for tourist promotion. Itoigawa City’s tourism averaged about 3 million visitors per year between 1997 and 2001, but began a downward trend starting in 2002, decreasing further following the Chuetsu Earthquake (2004) and Chuetsu Oki Earthquake (2007) to only 1.85 million visitors in 2007 (Fig 1). Itoigawa was then recognized as a Japanese Geopark in 2008 and a Global Geopark in 2009, which saw a stop in tourism decline. Coinciding with the opening of the Hokuriku Shinkansen, Itoigawa saw 2.49 million visitors in 2015.

The Fossa Magna Museum is Itoigawa Geopark’s central facility. On its opening year in 1994, the museum saw 95,705 visitors, but this had over halved to 40,683 visitors in 2007 (Fig 2). This can be seen to be a result of not only disasters, but also because the museum’s exhibits had never been updated. Following Geopark certification, the museum saw an increase to nearly 60,000 annual visitors and, following the opening of the Hokuriku Shinkansen and a complete renovation of the museum’s exhibits, the museum saw a record-breaking 101,725 visitors in 2015.

Takanami-no-ike Pond is part of the tourism course which visits the Kotakigawa Jade Gorge, one of Itoigawa’s jade producing gorges and Itoigawa’s representative geosite. After Global Geopark certification in 2009, an increase in bus tours saw a peak of 28,940 visitors in 2012. However, bus tours continue to decrease, with only 17,720 visitors in 2014. There is no regular public transportation to Takanami-no-Ike Pond, so the opening of the Hokuriku Shinkansen had no effect on these numbers, and 2017 saw a continued downward trend with only 14,610 visitors.

Itoigawa Geopark formed the Geopark Tourist Guide Society in 2010. During this first year, the guides led 97 tours of 1770 people. The Hokuriku Shinkansen has increased demand for tours and following the Itoigawa City Station North Fire of 2016, tours of the affected areas are also in demand. In 2017, there were 147 tours of 3,645 people recorded.

The Itoigawa Geopark Certification Exam started in 2009 as a ‘gotochi kentei’ regional certification exam. Such exams are popular in Japan to promote study of local culture and history. The first year, which coincided with Global Geopark Certification, saw 464 testees (Fig 3). Itoigawa Geopark and Hong Kong Geopark share a sister geopark relationship and since 2011 have conducted student exchange programs. Itoigawa Geopark requires that participants pass the first level of Itoigawa Geopark Certifications. For this reason, the number of primary school students taking the test increased from 20 in the first year to 86 in 2011.

Recently, foreign tourism to Japan has been increasing dramatically, and Itoigawa is no exception. 2013

saw only 154 foreign visitors staying in Itoigawa hotels (Fig 4), but since Geoparks became an official UNESCO Program (2015) and the through promotional efforts including the Itoigawa Seafood Shuttle Bus (2015), these have increased to 2,662 visitors in 2017, an increase even more dramatic than that of nearby cities such as Hakuba.

The Geopark Activities have seen an increase in visitors to the Fossa Magna Museum and foreign visitors, but regions of the Geopark that lack public transportation infrastructure like Takanami-no-Ike Pond continue to see a noteworthy decrease in yearly visitors. Furthermore, projects such as the Hokuriku Shinkansen and Geopark Certification Exam have significant effects, but these effects diminish over time. Further polishing of the region' s attractiveness and development of new programs and activities are essential.

Keywords: Itoigawa UNESCO Global Geopark, Fossa Magna Museum, Kotakigawa Jade Gorge, Sustainable Development

