

## **Konosuke Matsuhita Memorials Foundation Research Grant Report (Number: 16-604)**

### ***Understand the Impact of Kumamoto Earthquake on International Tourism of the Region***

Bui Thanh Huong, Associate professor of Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, Japan

#### **INTRODUCTION**

On April 14 and 16, 2016, a series of major earthquakes began to shake the island of Kyushu, mainly centering on the city of Kumamoto and Oita prefecture. The traveling epicenters can be seen from the map to place along a single line dividing the large island of Kyushu into two, with three major clusters in Kumamoto/Mashiki, north Aso and Yufuin/Beppu. The earthquake has destroyed physical infrastructure; and the media ‘bomb’ with tendency to cover negative news of the disaster has created a climate of fear of travelling to and concern about safety of Kyushu region. Long-lasting effect of negative media coverage poses great challenges to authorities and tourism industry to implement appropriate strategies to control the ‘damages’ effectively and efficiently. This is a timely project about the most recent natural disaster devastating Kumamoto and Oita, where (international) tourism has become increasingly important. The study emphasizes on the missing link of tourism into disaster planning and management. In particular, the researcher investigates:

- (1) The extent to which Kyushu tourism destination image that has been destroyed by media coverage of the natural disaster;
- (2) The degree to which the destination image has been restored through post-disaster recovery campaign, and
- (3) Learning experience from other destinations affected by natural disasters, such as Kobe and Miyagi prefectures.

#### **STUDY METHODS**

The researcher utilized the Sustainable Livelihood Framework to assess sustainability recovery with two tasks: (1) Assessment of institutional arrangements for disaster management; and (2) Restoration and development of human, social, natural, economic and institutional capital from tourism-related activities. Qualitative interviews were conducted with representative of tourism association of in the cities of Beppu and Yufuin in Oita prefecture and in Kumamoto city and Kurokawa village of Kumamoto prefecture. In addition, interviews with hotel business owners in these areas were also been performed. In addition, quantitative approach using online survey was also performed on international visitors in Oita and Kumamoto to investigate the degree of risk perceived when travelling to disaster-affected area in Kyushu. Also, comparative study was also formed with field visit to Kobe and Myiagi prefecture to investigate how post-disaster recovery

was restored, educated and broadcasted. The researcher visited document center, disaster memorials museums and actual sites affected by Great Tohoku Earthquake and tsunami.

## **FINDINGS**

Theories of disaster management for tourist destination often address the 4Rs strategies (Reduction, Readiness, Response and Recovery), and tourism managers should change their thinking from reactive approach to tourism disaster management (response and recovery) toward a proactive planning approach (reduction and readiness). Our initial investigation on the recovery of Oita and Kumamoto after the earthquake revealed that both prefectures were reactive in response to the disaster. The tourism industry has yet been integrated in the reduction and readiness phase of disaster planning. There has been lack of communication between functions of disaster prevention and tourism. Conflicts were inherent in tourism promotion as disaster warning and impacts are not favorable themes for destination image formation. Therefore, disaster prevention has often been eliminated from tourism promotional campaign. Among risk associated with disaster, visitors were highly concern of frequent after- shocks, treats of volcanic eruption and tsunami.

Post-disaster recovery of tourism sector has also taken different paths. City-based business hotels recover quickly owing to large demand for accommodation for construction workers, such as the case of business hotels in Tohoku or Kumamoto. This particular demand sustains the business for hotel for a couple of months even years after disaster. However, traditional Japanese hotels (ryokan) are struggling to survive their business. Several innovative strategies have been implemented, including renovation of facilities, changes in market focus and workers recruitment policy at the traditional ryokan. One of the main reasons being identified was that negative media coverage, however, has seriously impact the destination image and slows down the recovery process for Japanese domestic tourism market.

In areas affected by earthquake (Kobe -1995) and Miyagi (2011), post-disaster sites and stories have turned into disaster prevention center for educational purpose. Numerous sites affected by disaster have maintained and became significant part of kataribe, disaster related story telling for visitors who are willing to learn of what happened at the sites.

## **IMPLICATION**

Practically, linking tourism into disaster planning and management in Kyushu will set a case for other regions which are seeking to diversify its development through international tourism, and at the same time are sensitive to natural disasters. This calls for close coordination between department as well as a more comprehensive strategy to promote destination after disaster.