

Overtourism and Global Challenges on Environmental Issues: A Case Study of Japanese Tourism

Wulan Sekarani¹* , *Arsi Widiandari¹*

¹Japanese Language and Culture Study Program, Faculty of Humanities, Diponegoro University, Indonesia

Abstract. Overtourism is a term that has been used since 2016 which defined as the phenomenon of the increasing number of tourists which has an impact on the discomfort of the local community and or tourists in the area. The negative impacts of overtourism consisting not only in the form of direct impacts on humans, but also include impacts on the environment around these destinations. Japan as one of the countries with the highest levels of tourism, especially in its big cities which have well-known tourism destinations, became inevitable of this issue of overtourism which also has a major impact on its environment. This study aims to identify the impact of overtourism on the environment in several major cities in Japan, namely Tokyo, Kyoto, Hokkaido and Okinawa. This study uses the case study method by collecting cases regarding overtourism in Tokyo, Kyoto, Hokkaido and Okinawa within the year 2000 to 2020, and identifying the impact that occurs as a result. The results show that overtourism in the four big cities in Japan has a negative impact on the environment such as an increase in tourist waste, threats to the security of historic sites and objects, and damage to facilities and infrastructure. This study is expected to at least has an implication of providing new data regarding the continuity between overtourism and environmental issues with a focus on Japan in Tokyo, Kyoto, Hokkaido and Okinawa.

¹ Corresponding author: wulansekarani@students.undip.ac.id

1 Introduction

Globalization encourages the development of international tourists, where a tourist visits another country for various activities. The World Tourism Organization (WTO) defines tourism as the activities of persons travelling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than consecutive year for leisure, business, and other purposes (WTO, 1995). From the macro side, tourism itself is a sector that can provide benefits for the country. These benefits include creating employment opportunities, improving the quality of life, education, and others. Japan is one of the countries that experienced a positive impact on the economy, where the tourism sector contributed to an increase in GDP of 359 billion USD, making it the third largest market in the world after America and China (JETRO, n.d.). From 2011 to 2019, Japan has consistently increasing in the number of foreign tourists visiting Japan, although in 2020 the number dropped dramatically due to the Covid-19 outbreak that hit the world.

The increasing amount in international tourists cannot be separated from several factors, including bilateral relations between countries, the presence of Low Cost Carrier (LCC), and also ease of visa processing (visa exemption). Although it has many positive impacts, the large increase in tourists could also causes another problem, which is then called overtourism. The word “Overtourism” began to appear in public in 2016, 'overtourism' can be defined as "the impact of tourism on a destination, or parts thereof, that excessively influences perceived quality of life of citizens and/or quality of visitors experiences in a negative way". (“Overtourism”?- Understanding and Managing Urban Tourism Growth beyond Perceptions, Executive Summary," 2018).

The phenomenon of overtourism is also often seen in Japan. Kyoto is one of the cities where overtourism occurs. A number of tourists both domestic and international filled the station and also the bus stop and resulted in very long queues. In addition to Kyoto, Hokkaido Prefecture is also a place that suffers from Overtourism. In winter, Hokkaido becomes a destination for those who want to enjoy skiing. A number of new inns were established in order to respond to the accommodation needs of tourists. In southern Japan, Okinawa is also a target area for tourists. The prefecture, which is famous for its beautiful sea, had experienced serious conditions due to a surge in the number of tourists visiting.

In this study, we tried to focus on the situation of overtourism that occurs in several cities in Japan by looking at the environmental point of

view. The focus of this research is to reveal how the impact of the tourism sector can also have a negative impact, in addition to positive feedback that is also obtained such as economic, educational and social improvements. Japan has several places affected by overtourism such as Tokyo, Kyoto, Okinawa and Hokkaido which all four have tourism attractions both in terms of cultural wealth to natural beauty. We tried to show some of the negative impacts caused by Overtourism that occurred in Japan. This study does not intend to compare one with another. The data extraction process in this study was carried out by taking several sources related to the phenomenon that occurred in the four cities, within the period 2000 to 2020.

2 Result and Discussion

2.1 Tokyo

As the capital city of Japan, Tokyo is the most densely populated city in the country. This city is the center of administration, government, economy as well as several other aspects of life, including as one of Japan's leading tourist destinations. In 2017, Tokyo generated 5.8 trillion yen and provided employment opportunities for 853,997 people from the tourism sector (Tokyo Tourism Industry Promotion Action Plan, 2019). The number of tourists coming to Tokyo has doubled in the last 10 years, where the most activities carried out by tourists in Tokyo are enjoying Japanese specialties, followed by other tourist activities such as visiting traditional buildings, exploring high-rised buildings etc. Based on data released by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government in 2017, Shinjuku (Okubo), Ginza, Asakusa, Shibuya and Akihabara are the favorite destinations for tourists.

Halloween is a momentum that has attracted the attention of many young people around the world. In Japan, Halloween celebrations are generally centered in Shibuya. This event in Shibuya is quite appealing not only to young Japanese people, but also international citizens and tourists in Japan. The problem occurred on the day after the Halloween celebration, where piles of garbage from leftover drink bottles, plastics and even parts of Halloween costumes polluted the Shibuya area where the party was celebrated. Volunteers were even deployed to participate in cleaning up the remaining garbage of the costume party (The Japan Times, 2016). In 2018 there was a riot during a Halloween party in Shibuya, where a group of drunk people rolled over a car. In 2019, shops operating

near Shibuya's Halloween celebration center were banned from selling alcoholic beverages. In a statement published in *The Asahi Shinbun* (2019), this time it has a slight positive impact, where the amount of waste generated during the Halloween celebration is only half of the amount in the previous year.

From this incident, we can see how a celebration that has the potential to bring in a large number of visitors can have an impact on the amount of waste produced. Although there are some Japanese people who volunteer to clean the area, it seems that there needs to be full awareness from visitors to participate in protecting the environment.

2.2 Kyoto

As one of the biggest tourist destinations in Japan, Kyoto is widely known for its cultural heritage. From the many historical sites such as the temples and shrines, and the *geiko* who are still active in every day activities. With the number of tourists reaching 87 million in 2019 alone [Statista, 2022], Kyoto is unavoidable of overtourism. According to research from the Kyoto City Tourism Association (KCTA), locals often have difficulty in carrying out their daily lives because they have to wait for long queues for buses. In addition, tourists also often leave garbage in various places and take photos in private, residential areas that make locals feel very uncomfortable [Here Magazine, 2021].

Even with the impact of overtourism in Kyoto is mainly about tourists's bad manner, environmental damage is also difficult to avoid. Arashiyama Bamboo Groove, a UNESCO World Heritage, is faced with the behavior of tourists who carve their names on the bamboos, as if to leave a mark likely the same as in love locks in Paris. As reported from *The Straits Times* (2018), at least 100 bamboo trees were found carved in English, Chinese and Korean alphabet. Bamboo trees are connected by the roots and if one is damaged, the other will also get affected. In response to the incident, Arashiyama's management decided to cut down the trees that had been defaced. They also put up several notices in multiple languages to warn the tourist and raised the fence so that it's harder for tourists to reach the bamboos.

Although the impact of overtourism in Kyoto is dominated by local discomfort over tourists' manner, Kyoto's environment also faces similar problems with damage to tourist sites. With this, unilateral efforts in

dealing with damage by the managers alone are clearly not enough, tourists awareness is also needed to maintain this destinations.

2.3 Hokkaido

As an island located at the top of Japan, Hokkaido is often become the main destination for tourists looking for ski sports attractions in nature that is still very well preserved. With its several volcanoes, this area is also famous for natural hot springs (*onsen*) and various natural landscapes that are quite well preserved. The Ainu as the main inhabitants of Hokkaido also brought and preserved much of their culture to this day, along with other Japanese cultures, as well as modern cultures. This makes Hokkaido not only rich in beauty and natural attractions, but also has an abundant culture. [Budgen, 2023]

It is said that over 2.2 millions of visitors came in 2018 and roughly around the same number annually, Biei became one of the main tourist destinations because of its natural landscape. But for the roughly 10,000 locals, the visitors could be a big challenge. There have been reports of discomfort among local residents of Biei, particularly among the farmers of these lands. The main problem comes from the attitude of tourists who often trespass land owned by local residents just to get photos which results in damaging the crops. There have also been reports of illegal drone flights over private lands. Reporting from The Nation (2023), a 35-years-old man who runs a farm in Biei said "if pathogens or pests stuck to people's shoes are brought into the fields, I can't calculate the damage it would cause to crops".

Due to these threats, Biei local residents took several countermeasures, among which they decided to cut down the "Philosophy Tree", one of a popular photo spot, in the hope of reducing the number of tourists who come. In addition to the reasons, the tree is considerably already too old and at risk of falling at any time. The tree finally began to be cut down on February 24, 2016 and was completed the next day [The Mainichi, 2016]. Aside from that, a group of farmers in Biei decided to start a crowd funding project conducted through the website "Janpakuru Funding", a multi-lingual website, with the title "Protecting the Countryside, Creating Harmony Between Visitors and Farmers! Making Biei the Best Place it can be!". The donations are later used to create signage that has the land owner's name as well as letting visitors donate

directly to the farmer through a QR code. This project raised 1 million yen in only 3 days. [ACN Newswire, 2016]

In Hokkaido itself, we can see that the problem of overtourism also has a significant influence on its environment. The large number of tourists with bad behavior is a threat to the preservation of its beautiful land. After several complaints about tourists trespassing to take photos and flying drones through these lands, finally the local community made a decision by making a project to re-educate the tourist, even cutting down a tree that is its main tourist attractor.

2.4 Okinawa

Located on the southernmost side of Japan, Okinawa is a prefecture that rich in natural beauty and unique culture. Okinawa's climate is slightly different from most parts of Japan, making Okinawa one of Japan's leading destinations both domestically and internationally. The Okinawa Prefectural Department of Culture, Tourism and Sports announced that in 2019, Okinawa received 10,163,900 tourists which equates to an increase of 3.2% from the previous year (Ryukyu Shimpo, 2020).

With the beauty of the sea, coastal tourism is often a favorite destination for tourists visiting Okinawa. This causes overdevelopment, especially in the development of tourist sites and hotels along the coast which is prone to causing coastal erosion and increasing tourist waste that could endanger prefecture-wide marine life. According to a survey addressed to Ishigaki residents, 70.1% of the public are worried about the damaging of surrounding environment causes by erosion has an impact on the death of corals and other species. Ryukyu Island and Zamami Island are also the areas most affected by the increase in tourist waste, mainly plastic, which is inadvertently consumed by marine life and then also consumed by humans by the plastics entering the food chain. [Asia Times, 2018].

Another famous destination in Okinawa is Iriomote Island, one of the UNESCO World Heritage which is home to hundreds of endemic cats of Iriomote with the number of visitors reaching up to 290,000 people in 2019. Unfortunately, the high level of tourists on this island poses a major threat to the Iriomote cats which is now an endangered species with an estimated 100-150 individuals left on the island. With the number of tourists reaching 2,400 per day pre-pandemic, there have been several

traffic incidents that resulted in the killing of around 5-10 Iriomote cats each year. In response to this incident, the Japan Tiger and Elephant Fund (JTEF) initiated the construction of underpass passages and made a warning sign at a maximum speed of 40 kilometers-per-hour along the highway [Hakai Magazine, 2019]. From local government records, in 2020 when the Island was closed, there were no similar incidents. However, as many as 8 Iriomote cats were again found dead on the streets in 2021 to 2022 [TTG Asia, 2023].

3 Conclusion

In the era of globalization, tourism is one of the largest foreign exchange contributor sectors and economic drivers of countries that have various tourist attraction, but overtourism is prone to emerge along with the increasing number of tourist. Not only it has negative impact on the local community, overtourism also has a worrying impact on its environment. In Japan, overtourism is also unavoidable especially for Tokyo, Kyoto, Hokkaido and Okinawa, being one of the tourists's top destination choice. The impact of environmental damage due to overtourism in these places can be seen from the cases such as the problem of garbage at Halloween celebrations in Shibuya (Tokyo), defacing of bamboo trees in Arashiyama (Kyoto), trespassing and destruction of corps in Biei (Hokkaido), and coastal erosion and threats to cats on Iriomote Island (Okinawa). In response to existing cases, the government, local managers and local residents have made various efforts to overcome the existing damage. However, the negative impact of overtourism will continue to exist if there is no awareness coming from the tourists themselves who visit the said location.

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