Assessing the Implementation of Sustainable Tourism Standards for Destinations:
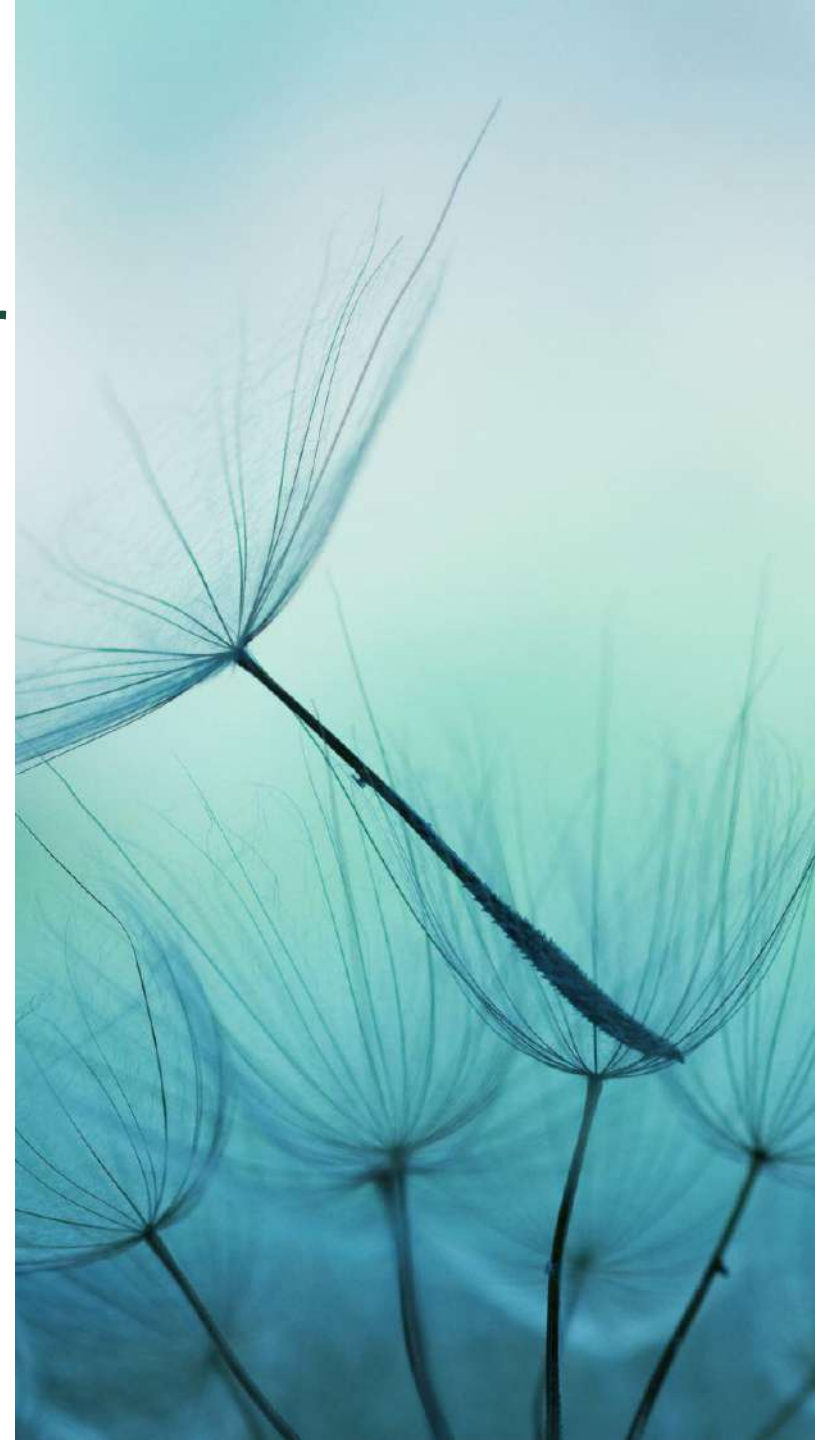
Opportunities and Challenges Facing Regional Administrations and DMOs

in Japan

Mami Futagami   (Professor Emeritus, Meijo University)

GSTC Trainer

Director of Japan Sustainability Coordinator Association (JaSCA)

Director of Japan Institute of Tourism Research (JITR)

Contents

・**GSTC-Recognized Standards for Destinations**（15）
- Some are owned by the national authorities (e.g. Thailand, Indonesia, Norway, Japan, South Korea)
- The public authority is considered the proper decision-maker for how certification operates in their country
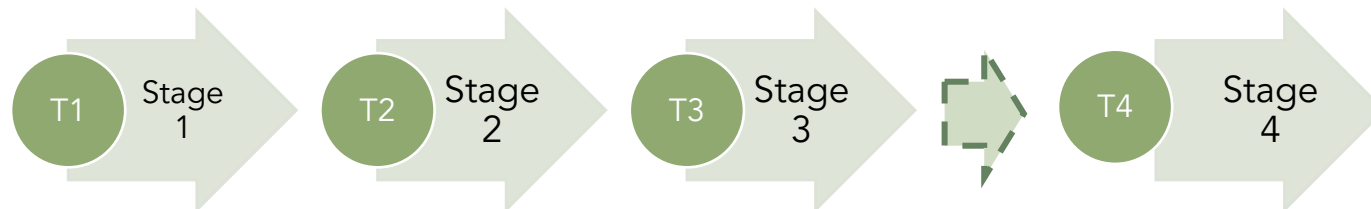
・**National tourism policies and governance modes**
- affect how the standards are operationalized
  → certification program and scheme
  → award system
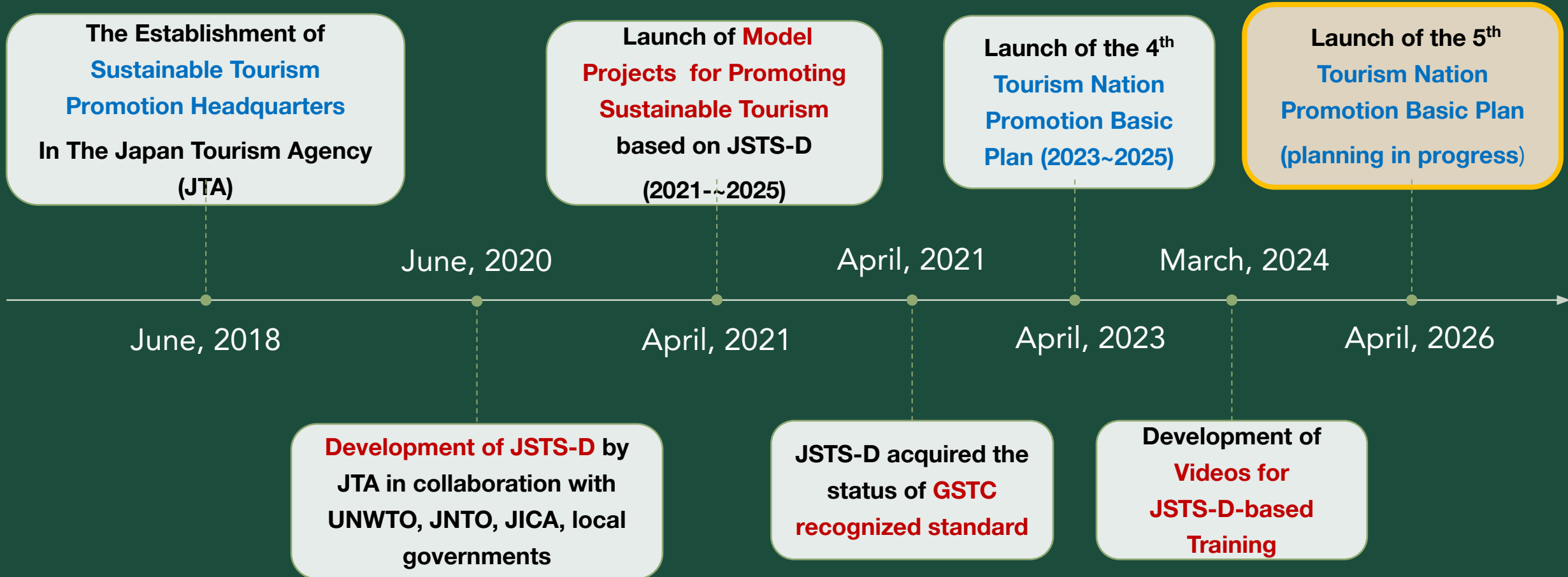 → assessment guideline

・**Case of Japan promoting sustainable tourism** as a national initiative
- The **Japan Sustainable Tourism Standard (JSTS-D),** GSTC-recognized, released in 2020

T1 Stage 1 → T2 Stage 2 → T3 Stage 3 → → T4 Stage 4

Implementation of GSTC-Recognized Standard (JSTS-D)

The Establishment of **Sustainable Tourism Promotion Headquarters** In The Japan Tourism Agency (JTA)

Launch of **Model Projects** for Promoting **Sustainable Tourism** based on JSTS-D **(2021-~2025)**

Launch of the 4th **Tourism Nation Promotion Basic Plan (2023~2025)**

Launch of the 5th **Tourism Nation Promotion Basic Plan (planning in progress)**

June, 2020

April, 2021

March, 2024

June, 2018

April, 2021

April, 2023

April, 2026

Development of JSTS-D by JTA in collaboration with UNWTO, JNTO, JICA, local governments

JSTS-D acquired the status of **GSTC recognized standard**

Development of **Videos for JSTS-D-based Training**

Key Concepts and Theoretical Framework of Analysis

Sustainable Tourism Policy

- The study of sustainable tourism policy has garnered increasing attention from scholars, and the number of studies has been steadily rising (Guo et al, 2019;
- The implementation of sustainable tourism policies requires successful execution, monitoring, and evaluation, which in turn leads to effective governance and transparency (Fabricius, 2021).

Sustainable Tourism Governance

- Governance is considered to be one of the most significant factors in promoting sustainable tourism within a multi-layered political framework (Amore & Hall, 2016; Farsari, 2023).
-

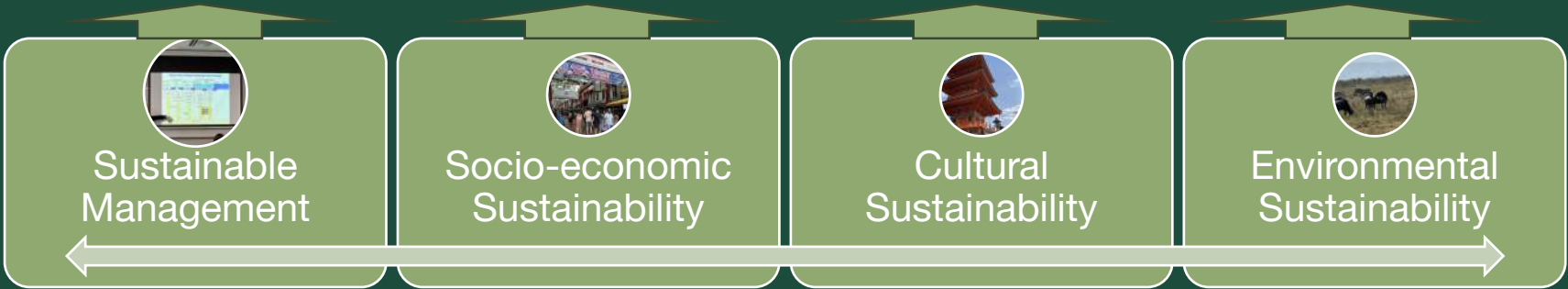**Metagovernance - in Global Sustainability Standards Research**

- Dealing with meta-policy issues, such as sustainability, requires new institutional arrangements and policy settings at global, national, regional, and local scales (Meulman, 2019, 2022).
- The concept of metagovernance is introduced as a critical lens through which tourism governance can be

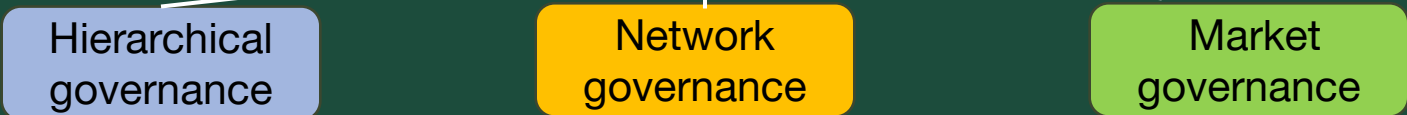# Metagovernance model and practices of voluntary sustainability standards
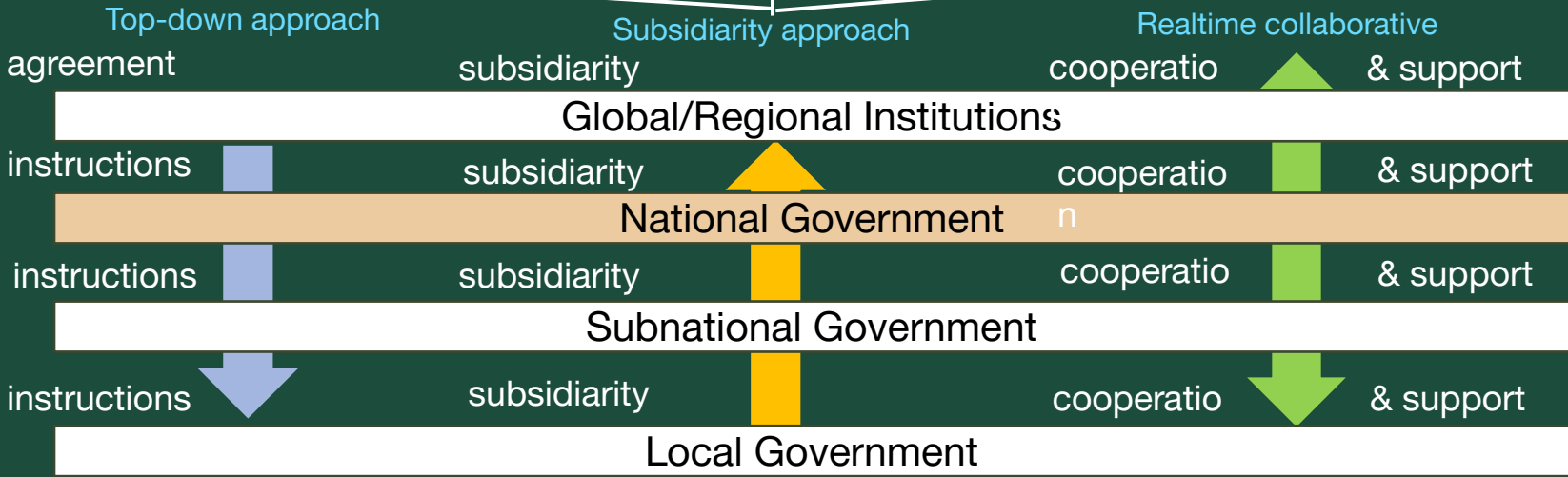
Meta-Governance Policy

UN SDGs

Global Sustainability Standards

Sustainable Management	Socio-economic Sustainability	Cultural Sustainability	Environmental Sustainability

GSTC-D Standard

Meta-Governance Approach

Hierarchical governance | Network governance | Market governance

Top-down approach | Subsidiarity approach | Realtime collaborative

Melti-Level Governance

agreement | subsidiarity | cooperatio & support

Global/Regional Institutions

instructions | subsidiarity | cooperatio & support

National Government | n

instructions | subsidiarity | cooperatio & support

Subnational Government

instructions | subsidiarity | cooperatio & support

Local Government

JSTS-D Standard

Impact Assessment based on JSTS-D

Note: Created by the author based on Meuleman (2022).

Research Gap

- Although **research on metagovernance in sustainable tourism** is expanding, it remains a relatively underexplored area, especially in terms of its practical applications.
- There is a need to explore how metagovernance principles are implemented in real-world sustainable tourism initiatives, including **the application of voluntary sustainability standards**.
- A significant gap is converting metagovernance theory into practical tools and frameworks that tourism practitioners can apply.

Research Questions

1. How has the sustainable tourism policy been operationalized using the sustainable tourism standard system?
2. How have national policy and the introduced scheme affected the development of tourism policy and planning strategies at the destination level?
3. What are the opportunities and challenges facing public administration and destination management organizations in adopting the national scheme?

Methodology

1. Content analysis

- 74 tourism policy and planning documents of regional destinations and DMOs authorized to use the JSTS-D logo for their sustainability initiatives

Three-step analysis:

1) categorizing the documents using pre-coded numbers

2) examining key performance indicators

3) evaluating the extent to which the framework of sustainable tourism standards is applied

## 2. Semi-structured interviews with government officials

Date: 10:30~12:00 May 28, 2025

Interviewees: Three national officials of the Japan Tourism Agency (JTA)

Procedure:

First, questions asked regarding 1) the processes involved in implementing the national scheme, 2) the way of verifying applicants' qualifications, 3) the way of assessing destination management, and 4) the way of providing technical support.

Second, open-ended questions asked about 5) the challenges of applying the national scheme, and 6) the projected scenario of sustainable tourism policy
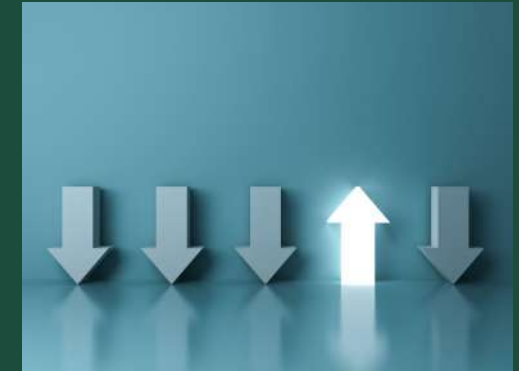
Findings

1. National Tourism Plan and Strategies

The 4th Tourism Nation Promotion

Basic Plan (FY2023 - FY2025)

Key Objectives are:
1. Promote sustainable tourism
2. Increase tourism consumption
3. Promote regional attraction

Three Strategies to work on are:
1. Create Sustainable Tourism Destinations
2. Recover Inbound Tourism
3. Expand Domestic Exchanges.

Sustainable Tourism Targets by FY2025

Establishment of a community development system

- Number of regions engaged in creating sustainable tourism
  100 regions (12 regions as of 2022)

- Of which, international certifications and commendation regions:
  50 regions

Basic logo

International logo

Qualifications of destinations receiving the JSTS-D basic logo
1. The tourism plan clearly states its alignment with JSTS-D
2. The current staff member has completed and passed either the GSTC STC or the JATA Video training courses

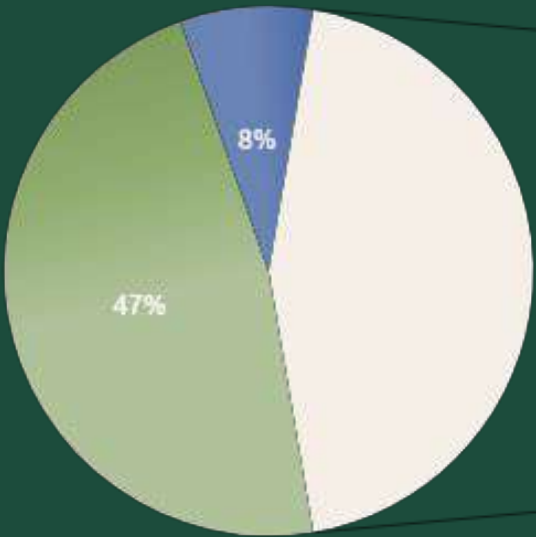Qualifications of destinations receiving JSTS-D international logo
  1 & 2 Same as the above
3. Evidence of International certifications and awards:
    Green Destinations - Top 100, Awards/Certification
    UN Tourism - Best Tourism Village (BTV)

Increase of Logo-acquired Destinations (May 31, 2025)   n = 74

Number of Destinations by Year of Acquisition
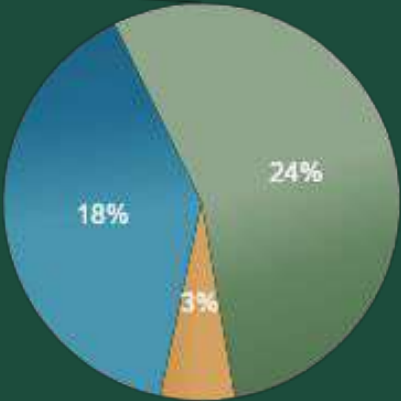
■ Number/yr. — Cumulative total
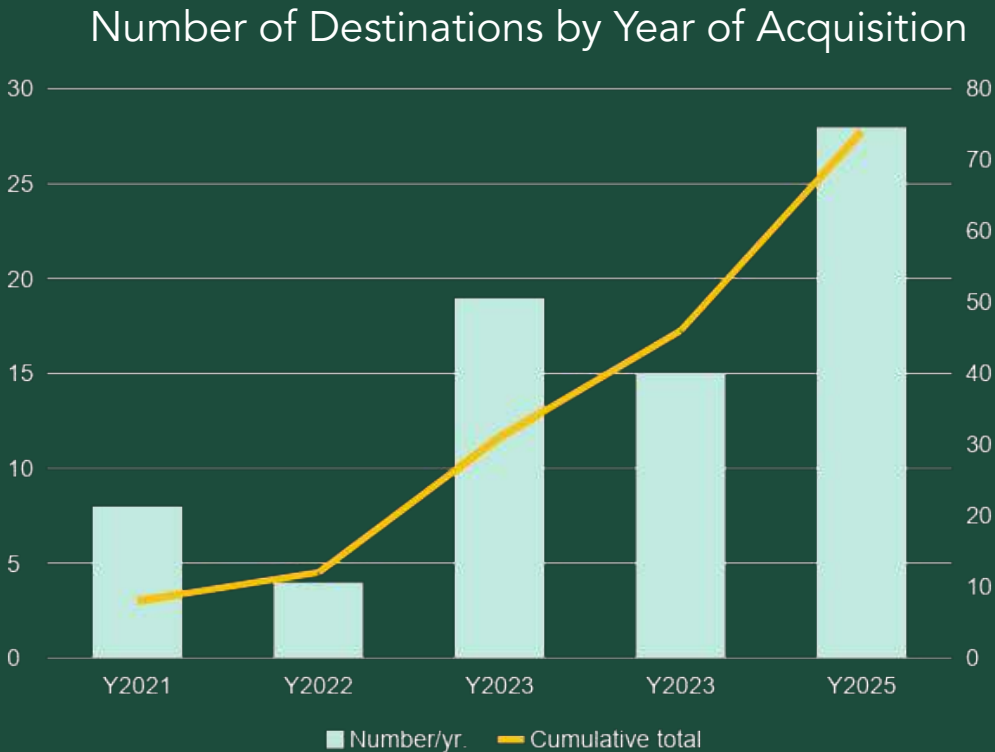
Proportion of Destinations by Organization Types
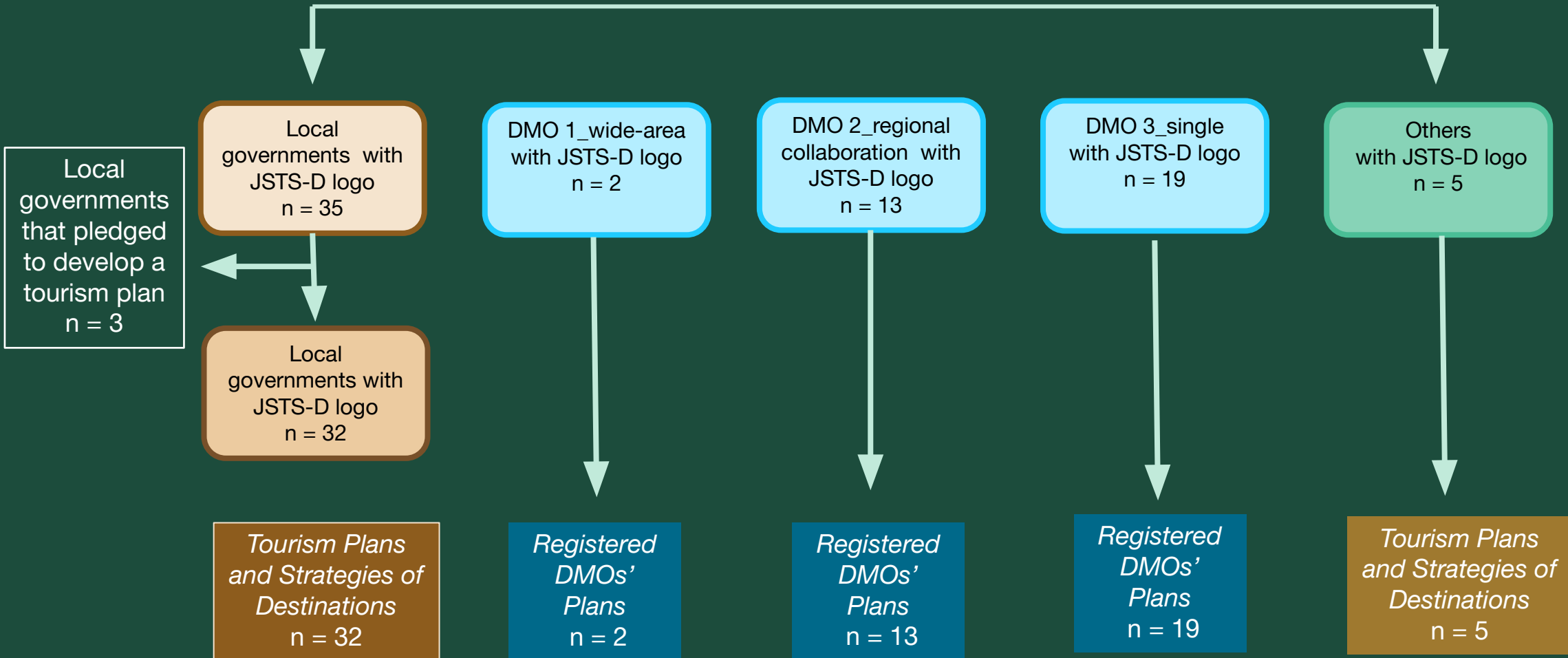
DMOs by Category

8%
47%
18%
3%
24%

■ Local government
■ Others (NPO, Private, Association)
■ DMO 1 Wide-area
■ DMO 2 Regional Collaboration
■ DMO 3 Single

1. Content analysis of destinations' tourism plans/strategies

Destinations that have acquired the JSTS-D logo
n=74

March 31, 2025

Local governments that pledged to develop a tourism plan
n = 3

Local governments with JSTS-D logo
n = 35

DMO 1_wide-area with JSTS-D logo
n = 2

DMO 2_regional collaboration with JSTS-D logo
n = 13

DMO 3_single with JSTS-D logo
n = 19

Others with JSTS-D logo
n = 5

Local governments with JSTS-D logo
n = 32

Tourism Plans and Strategies of Destinations
n = 32

Registered DMOs' Plans
n = 2

Registered DMOs' Plans
n = 13

Registered DMOs' Plans
n = 19

Tourism Plans and Strategies of Destinations
n = 5

This presentation focuses on the analysis of local governments' plans.

Data Analysis - KPIs

Economic indicators

Social indicators

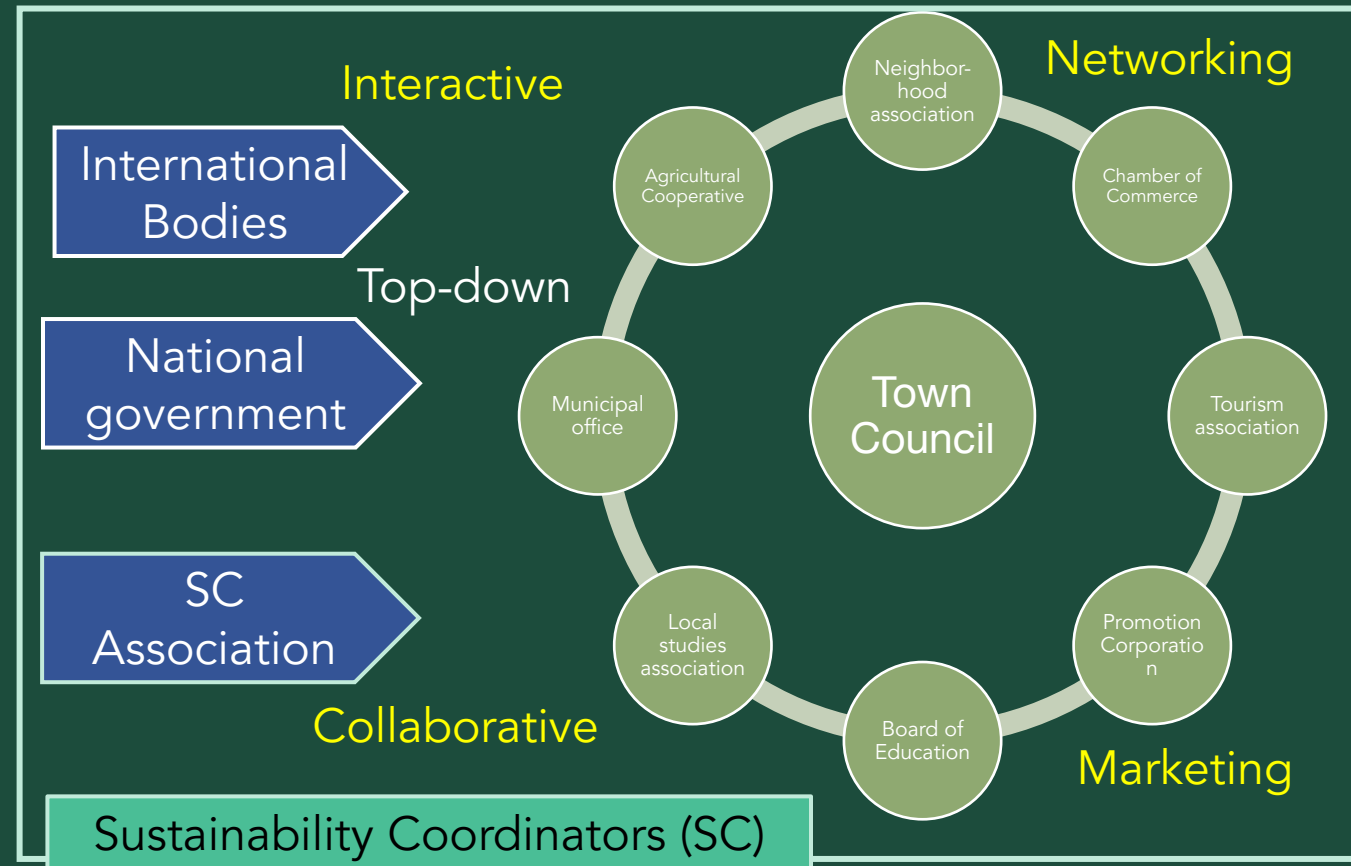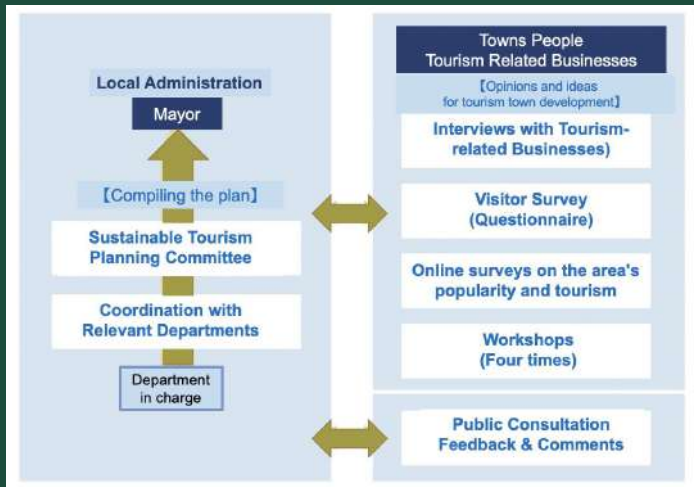# Data Analysis – Tourism Plans, Visions, Strategies
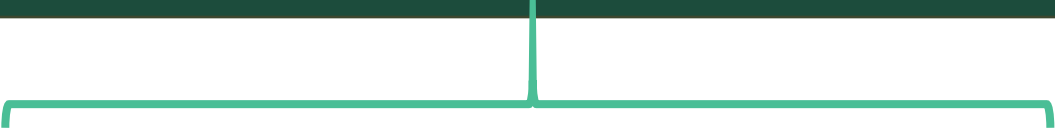
Analysis of Meta-governance

Destination 5

弟子屈町
観光振興計画

https://www.town.teshikaga.hokkaido.jp/material/files/group/9/teshikagakankoshinkokeikaku.pdf

Destination 10

Interactive

Networking

International Bodies

Top-down

National government

SC Association

Collaborative

Sustainability Coordinators (SC)

Agricultural Cooperative

Neighbor-hood association

Chamber of Commerce

Municipal office

Town Council

Tourism association

Local studies association

Promotion Corporation

Board of Education

Marketing

Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO)

Hierarchical

National government — Top-down

Regional DMO — Interactive

Local government

Project Management Office (PMO)
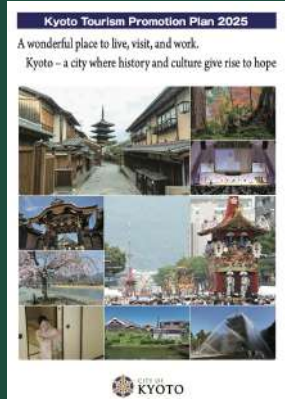
Community Development Council

Collaborative
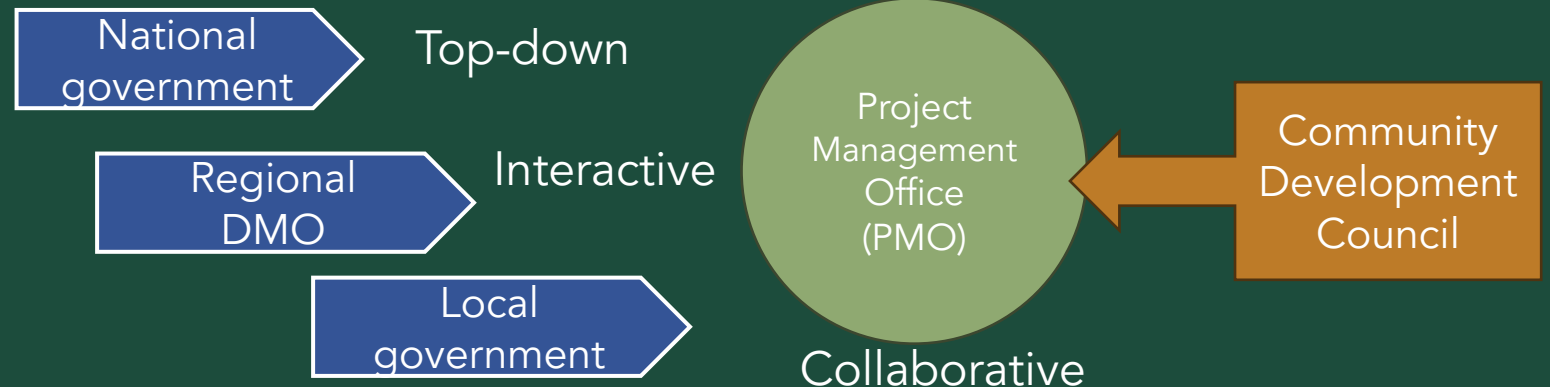
Significant Factors in Operationalizing the Governance of Sustainable Tourism

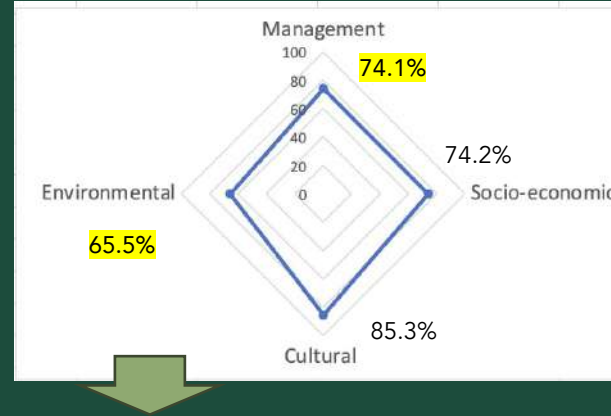## Data-driven measures

Destination 20
・Urban Tourism

Kyoto Tourism Promotion Plan 2025
A wonderful place to live, visit, and work.
Kyoto – a city where history and culture give rise to hope

83 Indicators
- Balancing community life and tourism
- Transforming to High Value-added tourism
- Revitalizing tourism businesses
- Risk Management, MICE

Intermediary support

Destination 30
・Disaster Prevention Tourism

Destination Assessment based on JSTS-D (113)

Management 74.1%
Socio-economic 74.2%
Cultural 85.3%
Environmental 65.5%

Making Disaster Prevention Handbook

DISASTER PREVENTION HANDBOOK
防災手冊 / 防災ハンドブック
KUROSHIO STYLE
PEOPLE TRAVEL, NATURE THRIVES, THE COMMUNITY THRIVES
KUROSHIO TOWN

Role of District Transport Bureau
- Technical support
- Financial support

Stakeholders Engagement

Destination 31
・Nature-based Ecotourism

熊本県阿蘇市
持続可能な観光地域づくり
アクションプラン ver.1

Action Plan for Developing a Sustainable Tourism Region

Making Guidelines (20 items):
- What to do at the accommodation (12)
- What to do in the area surrounding the accommodation and in the hot spring town (5)
- What to do across the entire region (3)

Tourism Businesses Engagement
- Certification for Accommodation
- Sustainability Training Course

2. Interview with the Japan Tourism Agency（JTA) officials

Q1. How the qualification of the applicant (destination) is validated:

" There are some things that we cannot understand from the required documents, including the tourism plan alone, so we look at many resources, such as information posted on the Internet, and see what kind of initiatives are being taken. We are also conducting work to verify whether the initiatives are truly based on the JSTS-D."

Q2. What improvements could be made to the current scheme?

"Over the years, we have seen some accumulation of data, so I think the most important thing is to be able to compare and analyze that data. I think that's probably one of the significances of JSTS-D."

Q3. What challenges do local governments and regional officials face when it comes to obtaining JSTS-D and the logo mark?

"The biggest challenge was not having enough people or money, which was often mentioned, followed by how to communicate the benefits to others."

Q4. What are the biggest advantages of this system? What are the key points for further development?

" With more and more regions in Japan getting involved, I think it's becoming easier to work on sustainable tourism."
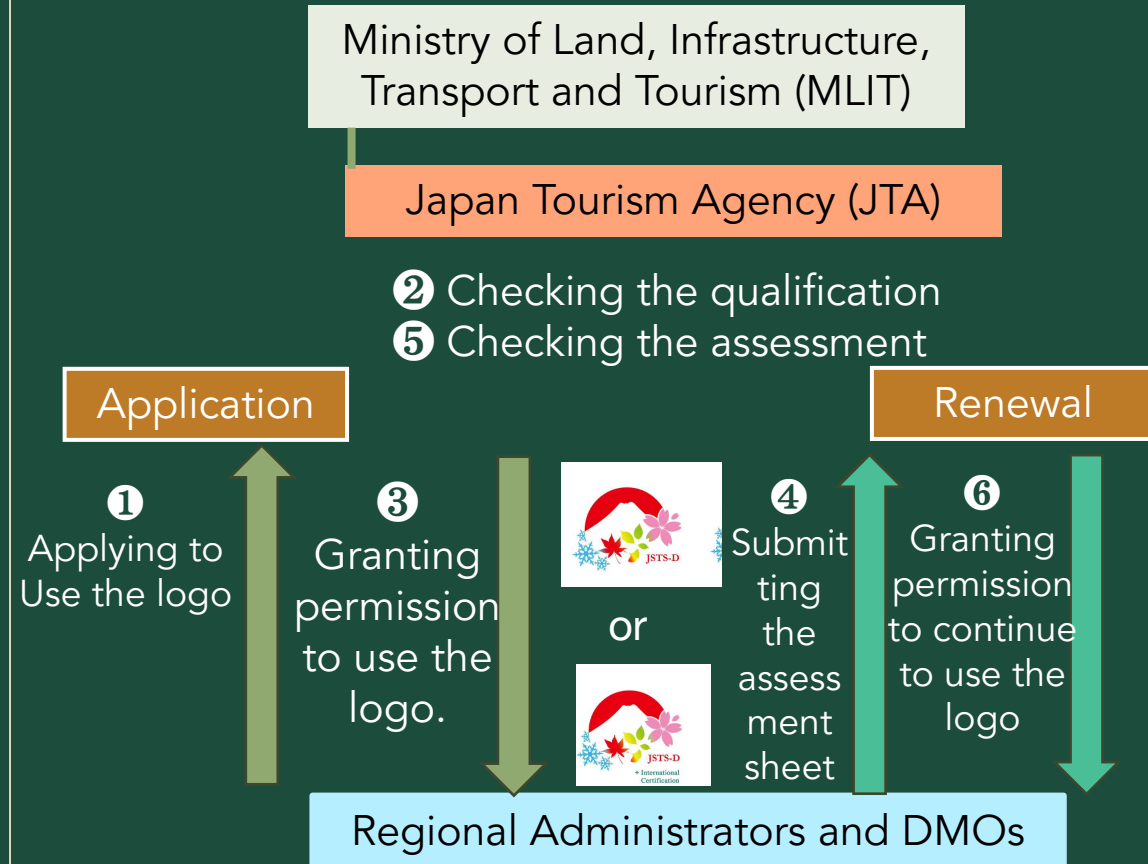
"I think it is important for the country to set goals such as showing the direction of sustainable tourism, and setting targets for the

Opportunities and Challenges Facing Regional Administrators and DMOs

Date: May 28, 2025
Duration: 1 hour
Number of interviewees: 3

Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (MLIT)

Japan Tourism Agency (JTA)

❷ Checking the qualification
❺ Checking the assessment

Application

Renewal

❶ Applying to Use the logo

❸ Granting permission to use the logo.

or

❹ Submitting the assessment sheet

❻ Granting permission to continue to use the logo

Regional Administrators and DMOs

Discussion and Implications

- The number of destinations and DMOs that have adopted the national sustainability scheme based on the JSTS-D has grown over the past five years, showing a positive trend in sustainable tourism efforts.

- The results of this study indicate that implementing the sustainable tourism policy based on a globally recognized standard has encouraged regional administrations and DMOs to include sustainable tourism in their planning processes.

- The extent to which sustainable tourism standards are used in shaping regional tourism strategies varies among destinations and DMOs. Typically, KPIs are selected to evaluate the economic aspect of sustainability in most destinations and DMOs.

- The destinations that have most successfully integrated the JSTS-D standard into their sustainability management systems coordinate and align different governance models (e.g., hierarchical, network, market) to address challenges and achieve optimal outcomes, that is, the mode of meta-governance.

- The retention rate within the national scheme depends on the opportunities and challenges faced by regional destinations and DMOs concerning the market forces of inbound tourism and the national policy with sustainability targets.

Two key takeaways for tourism practitioners and businesses

- The national scheme of sustainable tourism, utilizing a GSTC-recognized standard, has effectively engaged an increasing number of destinations and DMOs in the national sustainability scheme. This has contributed to the expansion of the Japanese market for sustainable tourism.

- Challenges must be addressed before fully integrating sustainability policies and practices into the destination. The government's role in collaborating with local stakeholders is essential for implementing the standards-based scheme within the meta-governance framework.

contact info

Mami Futagami
futagami@meijo-u.ac.jp
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