

GT News

The "GT," in GT News, stands for "Green Tourism." Green Tourism is a type of tourism which includes activities like staying in a farming or fishing village, participating in their farming or fishing work, and interacting with local people.

Agriculture is cool!

Shirakawa Wide-Area Green Tourism Council

Getting interested through hands-on experience

The Shirakawa Wide-area Green Tourism Council was established 15 years ago and has been inviting people living in urban areas to southern Fukushima to have agricultural experiences that can only be done in the countryside. Since the Great East Japan Earthquake, the council has been striving to eliminate the reputational damage done by the disaster by promoting the rigid safety conditions of agricultural products produced in the prefecture.

Fighting against harmful rumors

With Kunio Takita (62) as the chairman, the council consists of 12 - 13 farmers hailing from villages in southern Fukushima, such as Shirakawa City, Yamatsuri Town, and Samegawa Village. Seven of them offer farmhouse accommodations. Because of their steady efforts, 5,167 people visited in 2009 and 4,970 people visited in 2010 (just before the disaster).

However, reports came out claiming that Fukushima Prefecture's farmland and agricultural products are dangerous. Due to the fear of the effects of diffused radioactive materials, the number of people attending the Green Tourism experiences dropped to

1,245 people in 2011, a quarter of the number of visitors at its peak. The number of people visiting remained in the thousands until 2013, when the recovery project commenced. Takita and his colleagues recognized that the image of the nuclear disaster in bigger cities had not changed since the disaster. Mr. Takita and others are now working to attract more people to experience farm work, and champion the safety of Fukushima's farmland and products. As a result of their efforts, the number of visitors has recovered, and in 2017 they were up to 3,300.

Mr. Takita, a contributor to the community

Mr. Kunio Takita is now 62 years old. He has a cheerful personality and a passion for work. Mr. Takita served as the last village head of Omotego from 2003 to 2005. Currently, he is the president of the Shirakawa Wide-area Green Tourism Council and is active as a chairman to organizations such as the Omotego Mini Basketball Youth Sports Association and the Shirakawa Area Traffic Safety Association. Prior to serving as the village head, he worked mainly in agricultural-based civil engineering in districts needing land improvement.

Another notable aspect of Mr. Takita's career is his work as a farmer. As the managing director of Farm Fukushima of the Yoshinoya Gyudon chain, he is a leader in the field. Many of the ingredients of East Japan's Yoshinoya are produced by Mr. Takita's company.



Mr. Takita passionately explains his vision



Planting green onions in a field of Mr. Takita's agricultural company in Omotego, Shirakawa City.

Planting green onions under the scorching sun

In Mr. Takita's company field, five of our reporters participated in his branch of GT and planted green onions. Working in weather above 30 degrees with high humidity, it was sweltering hot and they were dripping with sweat. It was difficult to handle the green onions without damaging them. But it was fun to dig the soil and plant them.

According to Mr. Takita, the secret to entertaining Green Tourism's visitors is to "let them experience everything they can." Not many people in the metropolitan areas have a farm to dig in, so when they touch the soil and do farm work for the first time, many enthusiastically proclaim "this is so fun!" He said he hopes that this project will help revitalize the region.



Harvested green onions, 2 months after planting

Learning about Fukushima 8 years after the earthquake

Three months after the earthquake, the urban visitors who participated in Green Tourism were surprised that the children in Shirakawa were not wearing masks. When asked the reason why, they said they assumed that the children in Fukushima were wearing masks all the time because they had only seen them that way on TV after the earthquake.

Many visitors said that "It's different from what I thought". People outside of Fukushima only see the images made popular eight years ago, depicting everyone under evacuation and wearing protective clothing. I am reminded of it every time I see the gaps in the volume of updated news.

So, Mr. Takita and others involved in Green Tourism urge urbanites to physically experience Fukushima's soil and agricultural products in order to see how safe they are. Finally, Mr. Takita said with renewed passion, "it's a time of great change for our agriculture. I want young people to start new businesses, such as entrepreneurial ventures. I believe that one day agricultural jobs will be a revered and sought-after profession."

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