

Ecotourism

According to The International Ecotourism Society (TIES), ecotourism is defined as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education.”

For decades, the Minakami tourist industry was supported by mountaineers and visitors to its hot springs, but around the turn of the twenty-first century, the number of overnight guests gradually began to decrease. The area began promoting itself as “eco-town Minakami,” and the Tanigawadake Ecotourism Promotion Council was established in 2010 with the goal of protecting, utilizing, and promoting the natural resources of the area. It is the third such council in Japan whose overall concept for promoting ecotourism has been recognized by the Ministry of the Environment, and the first that is associated with a national park. The ecotours operated by the council include excursions into the surrounding wilderness to study the plants, animals, and natural phenomena of the area, as well as tours that introduce the history of the mountain and of Minakami.

The council also conducts regular monitoring studies to assess the environmental impact of tourism on nature and to find ways to improve their conservation efforts. In 2013, the town began limiting vehicle entry into Ichinokurasawa to reduce pollution and allow visitors to freely walk the roads. In order to facilitate visitation, the council operates two electric minibuses that run to Ichinokurasawa and are accompanied by a guide who explains the area’s history and nature. Park staff have also been stationed at the entrance to provide information and conduct safety checks.

Mt. Tanigawadake Week, a weeklong celebration with various events, including discounts on ecotours, accommodations, and dining, is held by the council each year to coincide with Mt. Tanigawadake Day (July 2) and the beginning of alpine season (the first Sunday of July). As part of the event, visitors can learn about the local environment while hiking at Tenjindaira, Ichinokurasawa, in the foothills, and at other locations.

Every August since 2013, more than 45 volunteers have worked under the guidance of the Ecotourism Promotion Council to eradicate the cutleaf coneflower, an invasive species. Volunteers also assist in the effort to regularly monitor the current state of the ecosystem and assess the effects of the council’s activities.