

Rebalancing Tourism and Forest Management on Mount Fuji: Institutional Challenges and Policy Implications

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1. Introduction

Mount Fuji has experienced a significant increase in tourism since it was designated a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage site in 2013. While this growth has supported the local economy, it has also brought several environmental and administrative challenges (UNESCO, 2013). Existing studies have mainly focused on issues around the summit area, such as trail erosion, climber behavior, and waste management along routes like the Yoshida Trail (Kobayashi, 2019; Jones et al., 2018). In contrast, the forested areas below the fifth station, though ecologically valuable and with potential for sustainable tourism, have received limited attention in both academic research and policy discussions.

These lower-elevation zones face not only physical neglect but also complex management structures. Stakeholders including national agencies, prefectural governments, religious institutions, NPOs, and private landowners, share the responsibility, but it is often without clear coordination.

This study focuses on how tourism development relates to the management of these underutilized forest areas. By examining institutional barriers and relationships among the actors involved, this study aims to better understand how management structures influence tourism outcomes and forest conservation beyond the summit area.

2. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach for better understanding of the site-specific conditions of tourism and forest management on Mount Fuji. It allows for close examination of the perspectives and practices of people directly involved in the field, something difficult to capture through quantitative

means.

Interviews were conducted with three groups. (1) Members of NPO Fuji Club, who have long been active in trail maintenance and visitor outreach in the lower forest areas. (2) Officials from the Ministry of the Environment's Fuji Five Lakes Management Office, which oversees policy implementation in the national park. (3) Long-term researchers who have studied Mount Fuji, especially those familiar with ecological and institutional changes over time. These groups were selected for their practical involvement and long-term knowledge. Besides, field observations were carried out between the first and fifth stations to examine trail conditions, signage, vegetation, and visitor behavior.

3. Results

The findings indicate a clear concentration of visitor activity around the fifth station and summit area, which has led to economic centralization and ecological strain. In contrast, the forest areas at lower elevations, although ecologically diverse and culturally significant, are seldom visited, poorly maintained, and lacking in basic infrastructure. The current tourism model, dominated by short-term visits and summit ascents, leaves little room for deeper engagement with the mountain's broader cultural and natural landscape. Moreover, the voluntary cooperation fee system, while partially replaced by a mandatory summit fee in 2024, continues to fall short in addressing the needs of these underfunded areas.

One of the central challenges highlighted in this study is the fragmented and historically complex management structure governing the lower forest regions of Mount Fuji. Over the years, responsibilities related to land use and conservation

have been distributed among a wide array of actors, including the Ministry of the Environment, the prefectural governments of Yamanashi and Shizuoka, local municipalities, religious institutions, and private landowners. Each of these stakeholders operates within their own jurisdiction, with differing priorities and limited coordination. Although when problems are identified on the ground, responses are frequently delayed or left unaddressed due to the absence of a clearly responsible party.

Table 1. Roles and Challenges of the Ministry of the Environment and NPO Fujisan Club

Aspect	Ministry of the Environment	NPO Fujisan Club
Main Focus	In charge of approving plans for using and protecting forests	Works directly on forest conservation and trail maintenance
Authority	Limited power, mostly focused on making rules	No official power, but works closely with the local community
Key Activities	Makes forest protection plans and sets rules for conservation areas	Leads volunteer activities for cleaning and restoring the forest
Challenges	Too many different groups involved, making it hard to manage	Not enough volunteers and unstable funding

4. Discussion

Unlike earlier studies that focused on summit-related issues such as trail erosion, waste management, and climber behavior (Kobayashi, 2019; Jones et al., 2018), this study examines the forest areas below the fifth station, which have received limited attention in both academic and policy contexts. Although these areas are ecologically important, they are affected by fragmented management structures and complicated land ownership. While the unification of summit signage reflects some level of inter-agency coordination (Jones et al., 2018), such efforts have not reached the lower zones. Fieldwork and

interviews indicate that unclear institutional responsibilities, rather than financial constraints, present the main obstacle to conservation and fair tourism development. Addressing these issues could also help increase visitor stay duration and promote more meaningful engagement with the area.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the sustainable management of Mount Fuji requires shifting focus beyond summit-centered policies. Greater attention to the lower forest areas and improved coordination among stakeholders are essential. Encouraging longer stays that engage with the wider landscape may also support deeper understanding and local conservation. This case shows how unclear institutional roles and divided responsibilities can hinder the protection of ecologically and culturally important areas.

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