

**Good Practice Story Title:**

From Forest to Finish: Preserving Aizu's
Lacquer Heritage

Destination:

Aizuwakamatsu

Country:

Japan

Submitting Organization:

AiCT Consortium

Category (*check only one box*):

- Destination Management
- Nature & Scenery
- Environment & Climate
- Culture & Tradition
- Thriving Communities
- Business & Marketing



Destination description (150-200 words)

Aizuwakamatsu City, located in the western part of Fukushima Prefecture, Japan, is a historic city with a population of about 110,000 residents and an area of approximately 383 square kilometers. The city leverages its diverse regional resources, including historical and cultural sites like Tsurugajo Castle and Imoriyama, natural attractions such as Lake Inawashiro, and various hot springs and urban tourism opportunities. Festivals and events, such as the Aizu Festival, play a key role in promoting tourism and revitalizing the region. Known for its 400-year-old lacquerware industry, Aizu lacquerware is crucial in cultural preservation. The city also promotes Aizu's Buddhist culture, with the "Aizu 33 Kannon Pilgrimage" recognized as a Japan Heritage site in 2016. Adapting to social changes, including the impact of the Great East Japan Earthquake, Aizuwakamatsu continues to implement measures to increase inbound tourism and foster hospitality, ensuring unforgettable experiences for visitors.

Summary of Good Practice Story (150-200 words)

There has been an increasing need for forest conservation, craftsmen, and funding to preserve the forests that produce local lacquer and to pass down traditional lacquerware manufacturing techniques. Originally, Aizu lacquerware was built on the local use of lacquer tree sap and seeds, but increased price competition led to the importation of lacquer from other countries. However, there is now a growing market and customer base that values sustainability, making it urgent to develop content that aligns with these changing times and to recognize the value of linking forest conservation with manufacturing. To ensure long-term sustainability, Aizuwakamatsu has built a model that links nature, history, and traditional culture with tourism. The city engages in discussions with various stakeholders on tourism promotion policies and drives initiatives forward. Through strategic matching, sustainable tourism programs, hands-on workshops, and conservation activities for forests and cultural properties are combined to enhance the cultural value of lacquer. By integrating tradition and tourism, Aizuwakamatsu aims to redefine regional development, create new market opportunities, and establish a model for sustainable regional growth.

Issues faced (150-200 words)

Aizuwakamatsu faces the challenge of balancing tradition and sustainability. Local restaurants delight residents and tourists by serving the regional dish "kozuyu" in special Aizu lacquerware bowls. However, Aizu lacquerware, once a daily staple, has become more of a luxury item, leading to decreased everyday use and concerns about the decline of the lacquer industry. Craftsmen are struggling to maintain their livelihoods, leading to the closure of businesses and a shortage of skilled artisans to repair lacquer cultural properties. The preservation of lacquer forests also faces challenges due to funding shortages and a decline in forestry workers. Maintaining forestry that provides high-quality wood for lacquerware bases and improving infrastructure like forest roads are critical needs. Additionally, the aging of craftsmen and the lack of successors threaten the continuation of traditional techniques.

On the other hand, there is a growing demand for high-value traditional crafts made from local materials. This trend necessitates the development of unique products and tourism experiences that contribute to forest conservation and the preservation of traditions. By raising environmental awareness among residents and tourists and promoting sustainable tourism, Aizuwakamatsu can protect its cultural heritage while utilizing regional resources sustainably.

Solution (100-150 words)

Aizuwakamatsu is building a destination model that integrates nature, craftsmanship, and tourism. We believe that the key is to maximize the rich history, natural environment, traditional crafts, and the faith of the residents who cherish cultural heritage, which are characteristics of this region. For example, the tree planting experience not only raises awareness of lacquer forest conservation but also leads to the protection of cultural heritage. By devising programs



that value "the spirit of residents who possess the mindset of utilizing resources to the fullest", and having tourists engage in craftsmanship activities for its utilization, it enhances the possibility of rediscovering the value of lacquer and creates innovative tourism resources. Through such a cyclical experience provided throughout the year, we aim to achieve sustainable regional development with our tourism strategy.

Methods, Steps, and Tools applied (500-600 words)

Phase 1: Forest Conservation and Sustainable Resource Management

In the first phase of this initiative, the focus is on forest conservation and sustainable management of lacquer trees, aiming to balance environmental protection with the long-term maintenance of traditional industries. By collaborating with local businesses, residents, and tourists, we are promoting lacquer tree planting activities to regenerate lacquer forests and secure resources for traditional crafts. Some private companies continuously plant lacquer trees and engage in mountain cleaning activities with both employees and tourists. Additionally, the increase in programs that offer camping and dining experiences in the mountains has raised awareness of forest conservation. Seasonal workshops are held to deepen understanding of biodiversity. In the summer, we host lacquer sap harvesting experiences, allowing participants to learn about the value and historical significance of lacquer trees firsthand. Moving forward, we plan to systematically utilize not only the sap but also the buds and seeds of lacquer trees. Specifically, we aim to incorporate lacquer buds as edible wild plants into the local food culture. To ensure safety, we will collaborate with food researchers and culinary experts to develop low-allergen cooking methods. Forest experts, food scientists, chefs, and artisans will be involved in this effort, promoting the fusion of tradition and sustainability through research funding, field experiments, and community workshops.

Phase 2: Inheritance and Innovation of Traditional Crafts and Integration of Tourism

Since 2013, we have been hosting the "City-Wide Art Project," an annual event led by the local government to preserve and create cultural arts and industries. By decorating the town with exhibitions themed around lacquer, we foster interactions among artists, lacquer craftsmen, residents, and schools, contributing to human resource development. The local government also supports the inheritance of lacquer traditions through subsidies for product development, the purchase of lacquer products by restaurants, and the training of successors. Museums and schools offer lacquer processing experiences and specialized lectures by craftsmen, providing students and visitors with opportunities to learn traditional techniques directly. We plan to strengthen regional promotion to establish lacquer craft experiences as a major tourist attraction. Additionally, innovative lacquer products are being developed to modernize traditional lacquer crafts. Lacquer candles (Japanese candles) made from locally sourced lacquer seeds have been an important industry supporting the regional economy alongside lacquerware since the Edo period. These candles were valued not only for use in temples and homes but also as gifts. Modern product development is underway to meet contemporary needs, attracting tourists as a unique local product and a connection to Buddhist culture. Collaborating with craftsmen, designers, and tourism professionals, we are also developing lacquer-coated snow gear. These efforts aim to preserve traditional lacquer techniques while exploring new markets.

Phase 3: Expansion of Year-Round Tourism and Strengthening Sustainability

We are addressing the issue of seasonal tourism disparities in Aizuwakamatsu. During the winter, the adjacent Bandai-Inawashiro area thrives as a snow resort, attracting skiers and tourists. However, the number of visitors to Aizuwakamatsu decreases during the winter season. To address this issue, we are finding solutions by combining Aizuwakamatsu's strengths in history, culture, and natural resources. Active promotion of events such as decorating the castle with lacquer candles aims to extend tourists' stays in the Aizu area and increase industrial revenue, contributing to sustainable regional development. Additionally, by offering seasonal activity plans related to lacquer, we aim to motivate visits to the region outside of winter. Through these efforts, Aizuwakamatsu aims to integrate the



protection of the natural environment and cultural heritage with economic growth, supporting the region's long-term development.

Achievements and Results (250-300 words)

First, it is significant that the lacquer industry, which has supported the economy of Aizuwakamatsu, has continuously implemented experience programs and art projects, gaining recognition among citizens and tourists. For example, the "Aizu Painted Candle Festival" held in February attracts many tourists by creating a magical atmosphere with numerous candles, including painted candles made from natural Japanese wax extracted from lacquer seeds, adorning the snow-covered Tsurugajo Castle.

The learning from sustainable tourism has sparked new possibilities. Local governments, DMOs, and private companies are collaborating to promote manufacturing and tourism industries through the conservation of lacquer forests, an idea proposed during the GSTC training workshops. Cross-industry collaboration is progressing, and concrete actions are being taken. For example, a partnership between a local snow resort and a Buddhist altar manufacturer has led to the development of domestically produced original snow gear. By showcasing the cultivation process of lacquer materials, the value of the products has increased, and the demand for high-end lacquer products is rising. This movement to rediscover the value of lacquerware has also led to the successful sale of high-priced products for outdoor use. Additionally, lacquer product retailers have established shared workshops for lacquer artists, connecting production sites with sales.

In terms of forest conservation, private businesses have planted 70,000 lacquer trees. With growing awareness of sustainability among tourists, there is a stronger tendency to prioritize contributions to local conservation activities. More tourism operators are incorporating forest conservation and manufacturing into their ecotourism activities, attracting tourists who want to contribute to sustainable initiatives. This realization is significant for Aizuwakamatsu, as it ensures continuous industrial revenue and addresses the decline in lacquer industry workers and funding shortages.

Lessons Learned and Advice (150-200 words)

To implement sustainable tourism, stakeholder engagement and cross-industry collaboration are essential. AiCT Consortium, a regional management organization promoting smart city initiatives in Aizuwakamatsu, hosted GSTC sustainable tourism training, providing a learning platform for municipalities, DMOs, and private businesses from Aizuwakamatsu and neighboring areas. Continuous study sessions have deepened mutual understanding, emphasized the importance of knowledge sharing and joint experiences, and facilitated the development of concrete sustainable tourism measures. This approach promotes cross-industry cooperation, fosters new regional relationships, and is expected to lay the foundation for long-term economic development.

Efforts to preserve traditional crafts have led to the recognition of Aizu lacquerware, designated as an Important Intangible Cultural Property of Fukushima Prefecture in 2024. Since 2018, Japan's Agency for Cultural Affairs has mandated the use of domestic lacquer for the preservation and repair of national treasures and important cultural properties. This decision has increased the demand for domestic lacquer and raised awareness of the importance of conserving lacquer forests. Collaborating with educational institutions and cultural organizations aims to nurture the next generation and ensure that sustainable tourism contributes to the preservation and development of regional industries. This strategy can be applied to other regions, serving as an effective model for linking tourism to regional development. Most importantly, fostering an awareness of valuing regional resources for future generations is crucial. This initiative demonstrates that lacquer forests connect industries and create sustainable communities. We believe it is our mission to build a system that protects and widely shares the treasures of this region in cooperation with stakeholders.



Recognitions and Additional References

- Aizuwakamatsu's Traditional Crafts & Tourism Experiences: [会津塗体験 | 【会津の広域観光はこちら】極上の会津](#)
- [CRAFT - Aizu Lacquerware | SAMURAI CITY AIZUWAKAMATSU](#)
- City-Wide Art Project 2024: [学校連携事業3 漆の『出前講座』&『植樹体験』- あいづまちなかアートプロジェクト2024](#)
- City-Wide Art Project Forum 2024: [《第1部》あいづまちなかアートプロジェクト2024フォーラム](#)
- Collaborative Project with the Museum: "Lacquer Workshop" [博物館との連携事業「漆のワークショップ」その1 | 福島県立会津支援学校](#)
- ALTE MEISTER, Inc./Lacquer Conservation in Aizuwakamatsu: [私たちの取り組み | アルテマイスターのこ と | アルテマイスター | 会津の仏壇・仏具・位牌 製造販売メーカー](#)
- [レポート | 会津産漆で金継ぎ体験Vol.2 | アルテマイスター | 広報note](#)
- [Aizu Lacquerware Cooperative Union 会津漆器協同組合](#)
- Zero Carbon Initiatives & Environmental Sustainability in Aizuwakamatsu: [ゼロカーボンシティ会津若松宣言](#)
- [Support system for the Aizu lacquerware industry | Aizuwakamatsu-shi](#)

Special Thanks

- Aizuwakamatsu City 会津若松市
- Aizuwakamatsu Tourism Bureau 会津若松観光ビューロー
- Sekibikodo株式会社 関美工堂
- ALTE MEISTER 株式会社 保志 (アルテマイスター保志)
- Bandai Resort 磐梯リゾート開発株式会社
- Hondaya, inc 本田屋本店有限公司
- Yuga Sasaki (Student, University of Aizu)
- IMA Japan