

UNWTO International Conference on Tourism and Snow Culture
Yamagata, Japan
1-3 February 2018

Press release

The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the Yamagata Prefectural Government and Japan Tourism Agency of Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism co-organized the UNWTO International Conference on Tourism and Snow Culture from 1-3 February 2018 in Yamagata, Japan. The overall theme, “Snow experiences and winter traditions as assets for tourism destinations” aimed to maximize tourism potential in snow destinations in order to contribute to the objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by identifying ways to utilize local resources effectively and sustainably.

The conference gathered 300 participants from 26 countries representing national and local governments, tourism industry leaders, academia, and local community members, and served as a platform to discuss how culture in snow destination can innovatively allow for the development of attractive tourism experiences by adapting to the shifting demands of the visitors beyond the traditional sport and adventure scenes.

Throughout the three sessions, presentations included case studies from destinations that showcased creative expressions of their local traditions, culture and gastronomy for sustainable community development such as the *yukigassen* (snowball battle) and snow festivals which have led to an increase in the awareness of maintaining the destination’s authenticity. In addition, participants heard examples about environmentally-friendly tourism experiences from Europe and about collaborative, promotional efforts of snow regions. Finally, ideas on how to expand tourism benefits beyond the skiing areas were also discussed.

Tourism leaders concluded by assuring that snow culture have a tremendous potential and can serve as a powerful tool for regional development, particularly in less-visited areas which have been affected by natural disasters as it was the case of Tohoku Region in Japan. Furthermore, as stated by Dr. Taleb Rifai, Former UNWTO Secretary-General and keynote speaker at the conference, local residents should be the first to enjoy the snow and feel proud to share their rich winter offerings, and unique stories in order to provide more authentic and interactive experiences for visitors.

The tourism leaders also noted the need to strengthen multi-sector partnerships and foster community involvement in order to attain a cohesive message and branding for snow destinations as well as strengthening investment not only in tourism infrastructure but also in training and development of a skillful and knowledgeable workforce. Lastly, Ms. Mieko Yoshimura, Governor of Yamagata Prefecture, expressed her strong commitment on featuring snow culture as part of the promotional efforts, with the collaboration of Tohoku as a whole, in order to become more attractive and resilient destination.

During the final day of the conference, over 100 travel companies gathered for a business-to-business (B2B) session. Buyers and sellers actively discussed development and sales of new tourism products, public-private partnerships, and investment opportunities.