

Tourists Come for the Monsters of Fukusaki

The town of Fukusaki in Hyogo Prefecture is using eerie mascots for their revitalization strategy, bringing back the heyday of the yuru-chara — mascots.

The town of merely 20,000 people is the birthplace of Kunio Yanagita, the father of Japanese folklore studies. Their realistic yokai (monsters) have left children in tears and generated a buzz around the town, attracting 1.7 times more tourists in 2018 compared to five years ago.

The most iconic of the towns using ghosts and monsters to develop the local economy is Sakaiminato in Tottori Prefecture, with its eerie Mizuki Shigeru Road.

Fukusaki promoters are confident, however, that the hype around their own town “will prove to be a match for Sakaiminato, because the yokai we are going to use will surprise even Professor Yanagita.”

A ‘Yokai’ Emerges from a Murky Pond

In a corner of the town’s Tsujikawayama Park, a 30-minute walk from JR Fukusaki Station, a crowd of tourists surrounds a murky pond, staring at its surface. Eventually, small bubbles begin to surface and two red kappa (amphibious yokai) appear — one big and one small.

“Look!” the children cheer.

The big kappa is called Gajiro, and it’s a character based on a yokai that appears in Yanagita’s works. It has a huge mouth lined with sharp teeth and coarse hair like a fallen warrior. Next to it is a child kappa.

In February 2014, when the town failed to clean the murky pond, it decided to take advantage of the situation by using the cloudy water to obscure the workings of a mechanical doll.

The mastermind of this strategy is Tomoo Ogawa, 45, who works for the town’s regional development division. “There are plenty of cute mascots in Japan. I made sure that our sculptures were realistic enough to make children cry.”

The park also features a statue of a tengu (a flying long-nosed demon), which was chosen for Best Sculpture at the National Yokai Sculpture Contest in 2014. Their creativity garnered praise and the number of tourists rocketed from 248,000 in 2013 to 410,000 in 2016 in response to installations like the tengu statues hanging upside down from wires.

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'Yokai' Benches Take Over

The town's audacity shows no sign of stopping. In order to attract tourists to the town center, nine yokai benches have been installed in front of shops lining the street from Fukusaki Station to Tsujikawayama Park.

Gajiro the kappa ponders his next move as he sits with a shogi board in front of the station, while a tengu clad in a business suit taps away at his laptop keyboard. With the addition this March of yokai Aburabou (a type of will-o'-wisp) and Konaki-jijii (an old man yokai that cries like a baby), there are now 14 yokai benches in total.

Taking full advantage of their Insta-worthiness, the selling point of these benches is that visitors can sit with the yokai for selfies.

The town's regional development division continues to come up with new ideas, including "giving tourists yokai maps so that they can look for yokai benches throughout the town and spend money shopping along the way." The plan is to install a total of 50 benches in five years' time.

Businesses in the town also favor the yokai craze. A nekomata (two-tailed cat yokai) sits on a bench in front of Gourmet Meats Nishioka, a local butcher shop. Yamato Nishioka, 75, the CEO of the shop, commented: "I've been having more customers since the yokai bench was installed. They have become indispensable to the town's prosperity." He smiles. His original cat-face hamburger patties are proving to be popular.

Following the Path of Mizuki Shigeru

A successful example of regional revitalization using yokai is the city of Sakaiminato in Tottori Prefecture. The town is the birthplace of Mizuki Shigeru, the manga artist who created Gegege no Kitaro.

Bronze statues of classic yokai characters like Medama Oyaji (a yokai with an eyeball as its head), Nurikabe (a wall yokai), and Nekomusume (cat girl) line the 800-meter-long road named for the artist leading from JR Sakaiminato Station. There were 23 statues when the project began in 1993. Now there are 177.

In 2010, Sakaiminato became a major tourist spot with 3.7 million annual visitors — 100 times more than the city's population of roughly 34,000 — thanks to the impact of the NHK television series GeGeGe no Nyobo, among other factors.

The city also hosts a variety of annual events, like the Sakaiminato Yokai certification event and the Yokai Senryu comic poetry contest.

Sakaiminato's yokai road underwent a large-scale makeover last summer, widening the sidewalk, implementing a barrier-free design, and upgrading the nighttime lighting. There are also plans to unveil a new yokai shadow-projection feature, holding nothing back to generate repeat visitors. Sakaiminato Tourism Association's Go Furuhashi says, "I want to continue adding new tricks to maintain our reputation as a yokai sanctuary."

According to Masanobu Kagawa, director of the Hyogo Prefectural Museum of History who is knowledgeable about yokai research: "Yokai are from the Edo period and were originally regarded as sinister. But modern yokai have transformed into lovable creatures."

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Following Sakaiminato's example, the town of Fukusaki is rapidly churning out new ideas to maintain the flow of visitors. There are picture books featuring Gajiro, plastic models, boil-in-the-bag food such as kappa curry with shirikodama, a mystical human organ. They have also come up with a Gajiro costume, which played a huge part in livening up the summer festival.

The town even plans to release a smartphone game app called "Yokai Mystery Photo Rally," which incorporates augmented reality (AR) technology. As players explore the town with their smartphones, they can catch yokai that appear on their screens by taking photos.

Now all eyes are on the town's eerie developments as promoters tout, "Visit Fukusaki if you want to meet lots of real yokai!"

Source: **Tourists Come for the Monsters of Fukusaki**
<http://japan-forward.com/tourists-come-for-the-monsters-of-fukusaki/>

泣く子も黙る“リアル妖怪”で町おこし 水木しげるロードに続くか

ゆるキャラ全盛時代に逆行するかのように、怪しいご当地キャラで町おこしを進める町が兵庫県にある。日本民俗学の父・柳田国男の生誕地、福崎町。幼い子供が泣き出すほどのリアルな妖怪オブジェが話題となり、人口2万人弱の小さな町の昨年度の観光客は5年前の1・7倍に急増した。妖怪関連の町おこしでは鳥取県境港市の「水木しげるロード」が有名だが、関係者は「柳田先生も驚く妖怪で境港に負けないにぎわい創出を」と意気込んでいる。

濁った池から妖怪

JR福崎駅から30分ほど歩いた辻川山公園（福崎町）の一角。濁った池の周りに観光客が集まり、じっと水面を見つめる。やがてボコボコと小さな泡が浮き始め、赤い大小の河童（かっぱ）が現れた。「出た！」。子供たちから歓声上がる。

大きな口に鋭い歯が並び、落ち武者のような縮れ髪が特徴の大きな河童は柳田作品に登場する妖怪をモチーフにした「ガジロウ」。脇には子河童もいる。町は平成26年2月、浄化できずに困っていた池の濁りを逆手に取り、正体が見えない機械仕掛けの人形を作った。

仕掛け人で町地域振興課の小川知男さん（45）は「かわいいキャラは全国にいくらでもいる。子供が泣き出すようなリアルな造形にこだわった」と話す。

同年から「全国妖怪造形コンテスト」も開催し、最優秀作品に選ばれた天狗（てんぐ）などの像を公園内に設置した。取り組みが評判を呼び、25年度に約24万8千人だった観光客が、28年度にはワイヤで逆さづりにした天狗像の登場などもあり約41万人まで増加。昨年度は約41万8000人に達した。

妖怪ベンチ増殖中

町の大胆不敵な企画は続く。中心部への誘客を図ろうと、30年からは妖怪と大人2人が座れる「妖怪ベンチ」を福崎駅前から辻川山公園までの道沿いの店舗前などに9基置いた。駅前のガジロウは将棋盤を前に長考し、公園ではスーツ姿の天狗がノートパソコンのキーボードを打つ。これらに加え、今年3月には「油坊」「コナキジジイ」なども増設し、今では計14基に。

妖怪と一緒に座って記念撮影できるのがウリで、「インスタ映え」も意識。町地域振興課は「観光客が妖怪マップ片手に町内に点在するベンチを探し、道中で買い物してお金を落としてもらう。そんな展開に向け今後も継続していきたい」とする。今後5年間で計50基まで増やす計画だ。

地元商店も妖怪ブームを支える。「猫また」の妖怪ベンチを置く精肉店「グルメミートにしおか」代表取締役の西岡倭（やまと）さん（75）は「設置してから買い物客が増え、町のにぎわいに欠かせない存在になった」と笑顔で話す。猫の顔を模したオリジナルハンバーグの売り上げも好評だ。

「水木ロード」に続け

妖怪を使った町おこしの成功例は漫画「ゲゲゲの鬼太郎」の作者で知られる水木しげるさんの出身地・境港市だ。JR境港駅前から続く全長800メートルの「水木しげるロード」には「目玉おやじ」「ぬりかべ」「ねこ娘」など、おなじみの妖怪のブロンズ像が並び。

平成5年のオープン時には23体だった像が今では177体まで増えた。22年にはNHK連続テレビ小説「ゲゲゲの女房」の効果もあり、年間で人口（約3万4000人）の100倍超の約370万人が訪れる一大観光地となった。

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さらに「境港妖怪検定」「妖怪川柳コンテスト」など毎年さまざまなイベントを企画。ロードは昨夏、歩道拡幅やバリアフリー化などの大規模リニューアルが完了し、夜間照明も整備された。妖怪の影絵投射も始まるなどリピーター獲得に余念がない。境港市観光協会の古橋剛さんは「妖怪の聖地であり続けるため、今後もさまざまな仕掛けを続けたい」と話す。

妖怪研究に詳しい兵庫県立歴史博物館の香川雅信学芸課長は「江戸時代から伝わる本来の妖怪は忌まわしい存在だった。しかし現代の妖怪は人々から愛される存在に変わった」と話す。

「水木しげるロード」の成功に続けと、福崎町では誘客を持続させるため矢継ぎ早の企画を立てる。ガジロウの絵本、プラモデル、レトルト食品「かっぱカレー（尻子玉入り）」…。ガジロウの着ぐるみも製作され、夏祭りの盛り上げに一役買った。

さらに、AR（拡張現実）技術を使ったスマートフォン用ゲームアプリ「妖怪ミステリーフォトラリー」を提供する予定。町内をめぐりながらスマホをかざすと画面上に妖怪が現れ、写真で捕獲できる仕組みだ。

「福崎に行けばリアルな妖怪がたくさんいる」。福崎町の不気味路線に熱視線が注がれている。

出典: 泣く子も黙る“リアル妖怪”で町おこし 水木しげるロードに続くか
<http://japan-forward.com/japanesehttp://japan-forward.com/japanese/泣く子も黙るリアル妖怪で町おこし/>