An ageing society and rural depopulation are ongoing issues in Japan. At Brock University, Canada, Dr Atsuko Hashimoto, Dr David J Telfer, and Sakura Telfer (Brescia University College) explore the use of tourism to rejuvenate rural communities. The remote village of Nagoro (Shikoku Island) has less than 30 residents remaining, most of whom are over the age of 70. Thanks to a returning daughter, the village has found a way to replace lost residents. Scarecrows placed throughout the village re-enact aspects of rural life. The resulting publicity has encouraged people to visit the village and take part in its One-Village-One-Activity ceremony – and even a wedding ceremony – and others are seen in casual poses, ‘chatting’ with neighbours. As of 2020, the opening up of the island has not led to significant levels of tourism. People have left the community owing to a lack of employment opportunities and the closure of local shops and services, including the local school. In 2012–13, the closure of two construction companies led to the loss of 25 jobs, representing a full 50% of the community. The nearest hospital is now a 90-minute drive away.

In 2002, a former resident, on return to the village, began erecting ‘Kakashi’ or life-like scarecrows around the village. The first was made to scare birds; the second to remember the loss of a friend and neighbour. As word of the scarecrows spread through the community, requests to memorialise more individuals who had passed away or moved to the city were made.

In 2009, the village greatly outnumbered the residents by 300 scarecrows in the village. In 2017, the village has over 900 scarecrows. The scarecrows are so realistic that Google Street View images show them with blurred faces (a feature used to protect the identity of people captured by the Google camera). The Carmen nuclear reactor, which was destroyed in the event, is the site of some of the earliest modern concrete high-rise buildings, and of forced labour during World War II. The island, which is home to more than 5,000 residents, was recognised as it appeared in the James Bond movie Skyfall, the island, located off the coast of Nagasaki, was at its peak one of the most densely populated places in the world. Once home to more than 5,000,000 people, it was the site of some of the earliest modern concrete high-rise buildings, and of forced labour during World War II. Making its 2015 designation as part of a UNESCO World Heritage Site controversial. Closed to visitors between 1974 and 2009, the island is now a heritage attraction, with tourists visiting the abandoned landscape and some of its guides being former residents. The opening up of the island has not been without dissent, with some former residents arguing that the island should be left undisturbed. Others, however, argued for the development of tourism as a means to support inclusion as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Today there is strict zoning in place to separate those areas open to visitors and those being allowed to decay naturally.

Today, these scarecrows have been placed throughout the village including along the roadside, in the abandoned school, and at a bus stop or in front of abandoned houses. The ‘Kakashi’ continue to thrive, with some former residents arguing that the island should be left undisturbed. Others, however, argued for the development of tourism as a means to support inclusion as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Today there is strict zoning in place to separate those areas open to visitors and those being allowed to decay naturally.

Like many other declining small rural villages in Japan, Nagoro has a rapidly ageing and shrinking population. In Nagoro, life-like scarecrows, ‘Kakashi’, are placed around the village in an effort to memorialise lost residents and those who moved away.

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Feelings towards the scarecrows are mixed, with some residents finding them comforting, but others uncomfortable with their presence.

Hashimoto and her colleagues have examined the scarecrow village through the analysis of secondary data (including social media posts, travel guides, news articles, historical demographic information) and from a site visit to meet with the originator of the project and document the scarecrows through photography.

The Kakashi of Nagoro did not begin life as a tourist endeavour; rather, they were an effort to memorialise lost residents and those who moved away. However, over time the media became interested in the village and soon after this led to the arrival of tourists. Understanding the Nagoro case study from an academic perspective is not easy. The village has been a slow fade away.

AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

Ultimately, tourism has not stemmed the physical or demographic decline of Nagoro. For many local residents, the scarecrows have personal significance and represent a disappearing way of life. Perhaps the most lasting legacy of the scarecrows is their role in putting a face (or faces) to the issues of an ageing society and rural decline, concepts that are abstract and academic in the lives of most ubanites and the younger generation. Rural decline has forced residents and governments to consider the path forward for villages in a post-growth environment.

If the future of villages such as Nagoro was uncertain before, the COVID-19 pandemic has made them even more so. In Japan, pandemic-related restrictions and guidance led to people avoiding rural communities. Whether or not migrants will continue to seek out rural lifestyles once the pandemic has receded remains to be seen. Hashimoto and Telfer plan to conduct longitudinal analysis that will offer new insight into the redevelopment of marginalised communities.

Scarecrows have been placed throughout the village including along the roadside, in the abandoned school, and waiting at a bus stop.

Based on your research, given the choice, do you think the residents of Nagoro would prefer to welcome new migrants or to allow the village to slowly fade away?

At the time we visited Nagoro, there was little indication among residents they wanted to welcome new migrants to preserve the community. However, lifestyles and business operations have changed during the pandemic and the younger generation may ponder the possibility of living in a rural environment. Whether the current remaining Nagoro residents agree to this is a different matter. The fear of being taken over by outsiders is real to them. Life beyond growth does not have to mean the death of the community; however, without structural support, communities like Nagoro will eventually disappear.