From nature visits to conservation awareness:

A visitor survey report at Shiretoko National Park, Japan





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1. Summary

This report summarizes the findings of a survey conducted with 100 international visitors to Shiretoko National Park in Hokkaido, Japan, during June and July 2025. The research project aimed to explore **the nature conservation messages that visitors encountered in Shiretoko**, and how overall visits to Shiretoko influenced visitors to consider new approaches, personal actions, and consumption habits related to nature conservation.

Visitors represented diverse nationalities, ages, and genders. Visitors were motivated by the park's natural beauty, wildlife, remoteness, and opportunities for hiking, wildlife observation, and self-directed exploration. Nature conservation messages on responsible behavior, such as trail use and wildlife safety, were widely reported, whereas **exposure to information on broader conservation challenges facing Shiretoko and success stories of local conservation projects was less reported by visitors**. Visiting Shiretoko influenced visitors in multiple ways. For some, the visit enhanced their conservation awareness. For others, the visit had no impact, either because it only reinforced pre-existing conservation habits or because the visits were brief and offered limited exposure to conservation-related educational materials and messages.

Visitors highly valued the park's well-maintained trails, wildlife encounters, and supportive infrastructure, and emphasized the role of visitor centers in providing safety guidance. Visitors suggested ways to improve visits to Shiretoko, including expanding multilingual information, highlighting marine and terrestrial conservation challenges, and integrating socio-cultural and historical contexts. Overall, Shiretoko is a **unique and inspiring visit**, with potential to further enhance visitor engagement in conservation issues and efforts, and to encourage visitors to take more action on behalf of nature conservation[1].

Nature-based tourism presents an exceptional opportunity to promote conservation awareness among visitors, but its effectiveness depends on how conservation messages are communicated. Successful conservation messaging should be context-specific, culturally sensitive, and integrated into visitor experiences in ways that are engaging, memorable, and actionable. Messages that highlight the ecological and cultural significance of nature, foster empathy, and provide clear guidance for pro-conservation behavior are more likely to influence visitor attitudes and actions. Applying these principles to Shiretoko National Park can help enhance visitor understanding of conservation priorities while supporting sustainable visitor practices.

Source: Adapted from Fernández-Llamazares et al. (2020).

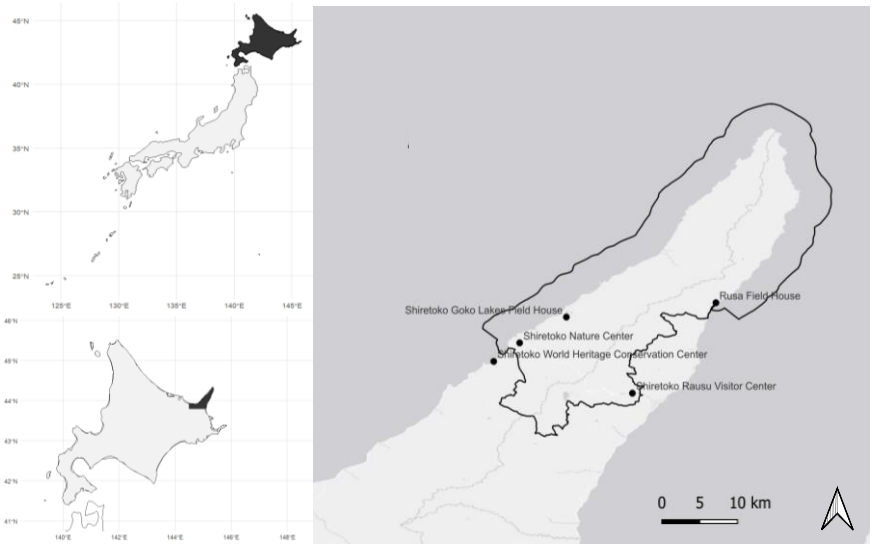
[1] Fernández-Llamazares, Á., Fraixedas, S., Brias-Guinart, A., & Terraube, J. (2020). Principles for including conservation messaging in wildlife-based tourism. People and Nature, 2(3), 596-607. doi:10.1002/pan3.10114.

2. Introduction

The aim of this project was to explore **which conservation messages visitors notice** and **how their visit to Shiretoko impacts their awareness, personal actions, and consumption choices related to nature conservation**. The study also seeks to provide insights for improving conservation-related communication strategies in the park.

We conducted a survey of 100 international visitors in Shiretoko National Park, Hokkaido, Japan, during June and July 2025. Shiretoko was selected as the study site due to its designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and its reputation as a premium nature tourism destination in Japan. The survey collected detailed information on: i. visitor demographics; ii. visitor motivation, planning and activity participation; iii. nature conservation messages; iv. impacts of the visit to Shiretoko; and v. visitor feedback. The survey included both closed and open-ended questions, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the visitors' experiences and their encounters with conservation messaging. For example, some of the key interview questions included: "Have you come across any messages about the challenges or threats that Shiretoko is facing?" and "Have you come across any messages that highlighted positive outcomes or success stories in nature conservation in Shiretoko?" The survey focused on international visitors who were approached in a casual manner by the researchers at the visitor centers and who stated that they were comfortable communicating in English, which should be considered when interpreting the sample composition and responses.

The Shiretoko Nature Foundation granted permission for the project, confirming that it was aware of the objectives, methods, and expected outputs, and authorizing research activities at its facilities (especially at the Shiretoko Nature Center, which is a main gateway for visitors entering the Shiretoko National Park). The research was conducted under Free, Prior, and Informed Consent and based on the understanding that no information would be collected which could identify any particular individual participating. Before participating in the survey, visitors were provided with an information sheet and given the opportunity to ask questions. The following sections present the key findings of the study.

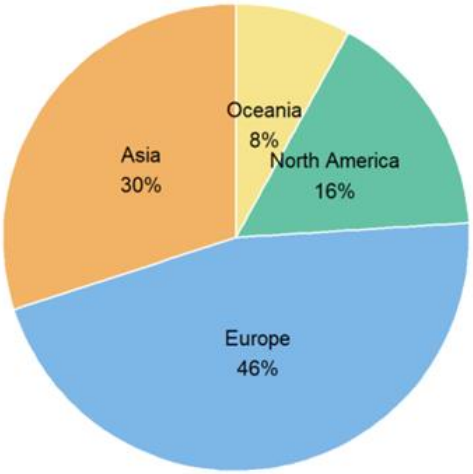


Map of the five visitor centers in Shiretoko Peninsula, Hokkaido Island (north Japan).

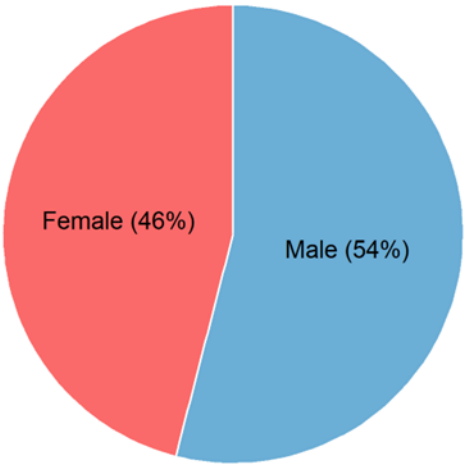
3. Visitor demographics

Most international visitors who participated in the survey were from Europe, Asia, and North America, with fewer from Oceania. The main countries of origin of the visitors interviewed were United States (14%), France (13%), Australia (8), Israel (9%), Singapore (6%) and Spain (6%)[2]. The gender distribution was balanced (54% men, 46% women). **The majority of visitors (63%) were less than 40 years old**. **Nearly all visitors were visiting Shiretoko for the first time (96%).**

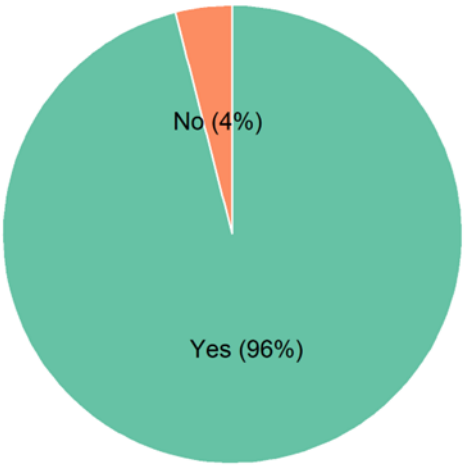
Visitors by Continent



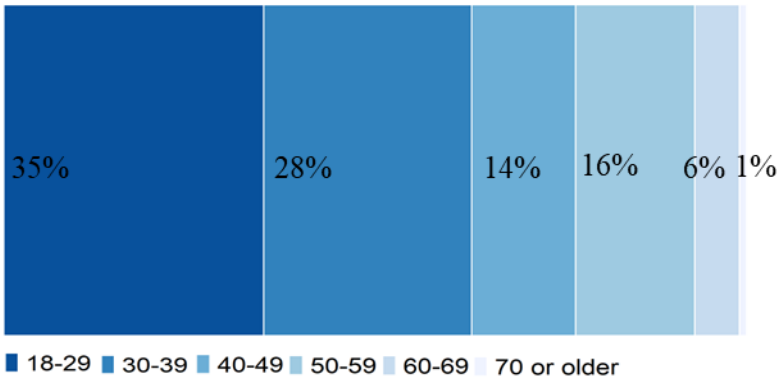
Gender distribution



First-time visitors



Age



[2] These results may not be fully representative of the diversity of visitors, but rather reflect the subset of respondents who felt comfortable completing an English-language survey. Open data published by the Hokkaido Government indicate that approximately 70% of international visitors to Shiretoko originate from East and Southeast Asia, while around 20% come from Europe and the United States.

Tourism Bureau, Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, Hokkaido Government. (2026). Hokkaido Visitor Survey Report (in Japanese). https://www.pref.hokkaido.lg.jp/kz/kkd/irikomi.html (accessed May 19, 2026).

4. Visitor motivation, planning and activity participation

Visitors to Shiretoko National Park were primarily **attracted by its natural environment, wildlife, and scenic landscapes**, with a strong appeal linked to remoteness and a less touristic setting**.** Travel decisions were further shaped by milder summer temperatures, and interest in World Heritage and cultural values, reinforcing Shiretoko's image as a pristine and wild destination**.**

Visitors mostly planned their trip independently**,** highlighting a **strong preference for self-organized travel**. Visitors relied mainly on online sources, such as travel blogs and general websites, followed by other sources such as travel guidebooks (e.g., Lonely Planet). Word-of-mouth recommendations and official websites (e.g., National Parks of Japan) played a secondary role, while unofficial social media content, including influencer posts, also contributed to planning.

The largest proportion of interviewed visitors stayed two days (37%), with stays of three days also common (30%) and longer visits of four and five or more days relatively rare, suggesting that Shiretoko is often a short stop within broader travel itineraries rather than a stand-alone destination. Visitors visited different visitor centers, including the Shiretoko Nature Center, and the Goko Lakes, while smaller proportions visited the World Heritage Conservation Center, Rausu Visitor Center, and the Rusa Field House[3]. Yet, these patterns should be interpreted cautiously due to sampling bias, as most surveys were conducted at the Shiretoko Nature Center. These spatial differences influence visitors' exposure to information, particularly nature conservation messages, which varied between visitor centers.

Participation in Shiretoko activities was mostly done independently rather than as part of guided experiences. Among those who joined at least one guided activity, the most common were guided nature walks, particularly at the Goko Lakes[4], followed by nature boat cruises and, to a lesser extent, wildlife night drives. These patterns indicate a strong preference for self-directed exploration, with guided activities chosen selectively for access to key natural attractions and wildlife encounters. Visitors who opted out of guided activities most often cited limited time and personal preferences. Additional barriers included economic cost, language limitations, weather-related uncertainty and cancellations, logistical challenges, and perceptions of limited added value. Overall, **visitors prioritized flexibility, personal freedom, and self-paced experiences over guided activities.**

[3] Ministry of the Environment, Kushiro Natural Environment Office; Forestry Agency, Hokkaido Regional Forest Office; and Government of Hokkaido. (2023). Shiretoko Hakusho [Shiretoko White Paper] (2023), pp. 54–55. https://shiretokodata-center.env.go.jp/data/research/annual_report/R5annual_report.pdf

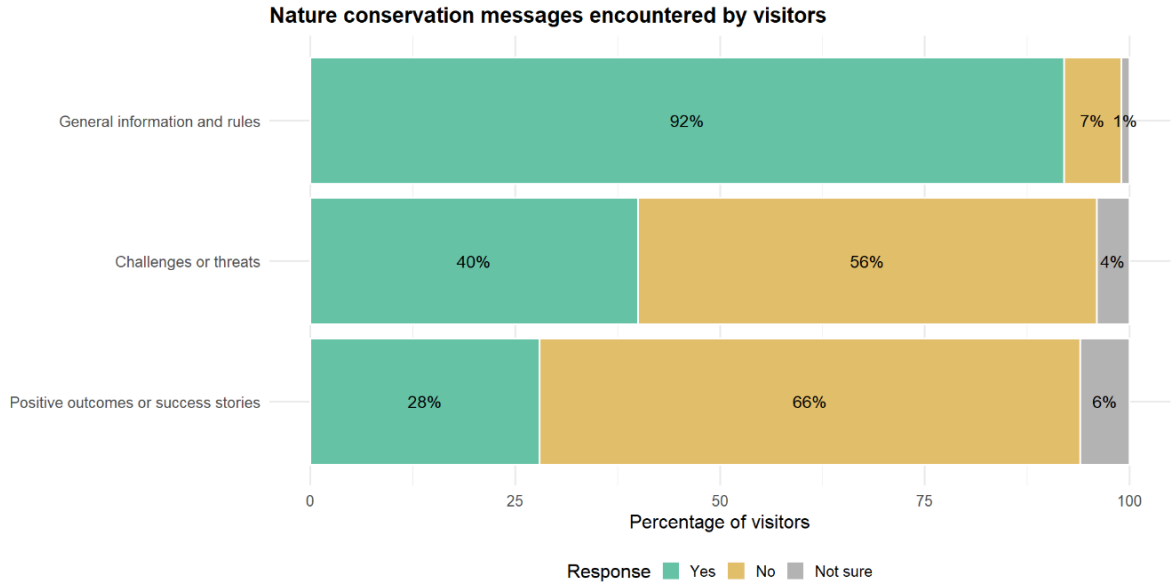
[4] Access to the walkways at Shiretoko Goko Lakes is restricted during the summer "bear active season" (May to July) and is permitted only through participation in a guided tour.



Note: Percentages do not total 100% due to multiple response options (except “Length of stay”).

5. Nature conservation messages

Most visitors to Shiretoko National Park (92%) reported encountering nature conservation messages that provided clear rules on responsible behavior aimed at protecting wildlife and habitats, including staying on trails, not feeding or approaching animals, avoiding picking plants, and managing waste properly. A smaller proportion of visitors (40%) reported noticing messages regarding the conservation challenges and threats that Shiretoko is facing, such as human-wildlife conflicts, deer overpopulation, invasive species, historical deforestation, and the impacts of climate change. Only a few visitors (28%) reported messages emphasizing positive outcomes and the successes of conservation efforts in Shiretoko, such as wildlife recovery, habitat restoration, reforestation initiatives, and volunteer projects. Overall, **visitors' perceptions suggest that conservation messages related to rules are the most easily communicated to visitors.**



5.1 General information and rules

Most visitors (92%) reported having been exposed to messages about general information and rules, which can be grouped into several key themes[5].

- **Rules of encounter with wildlife / safety rules / rules on how to behave**. Examples of visitors' responses:
  - *Don't feed animals (foxes, bears) to avoid habituating them to human food;*
  - *Don't litter, and dispose of trash properly (specific rules about recycling);*
  - *Stay on paths;*
  - *Stay away from, and do not interact with, wildlife;*
  - *Don't pick flowers and plants;*
  - *Be respectful;*
  - *Don't eat or drink sweet things (which could attract bears);*
  - *Clean shoe soles to avoid introduction of non-native seeds, etc..*

[5] Some visitors' responses have been edited or rephrased by the authors for clarity and contextualization, without altering their substantive meaning.

- **Bears: safety, behavior and entering bear habitat**
  - *Appropriate behavior;*
  - *The story of "Sausage" the bear (a bear that was fed a sausage and had to be culled)*[6]*;*
  - *Wear bear bells;*
  - *What to do in case of a bear encounter;*
  - *Food should be stored in bear-proof metal boxes;*
  - *Maintain distance with wildlife and make noise;*
  - *What is a safe and secure distance;*
  - *To report bear sightings;*
  - *To have awareness that we are visitors here in the home of wildlife, so we need to be careful and respectful.*
- **General information about wildlife**
  - *Booklets about marine wildlife;*
  - *The beauty and diversity of nature;*
  - *The types of trees found along paths;*
  - *The winter drift ice*[7]*.*
- **Relationship of interdependence between nature and people**
  - *Special characteristics of the sea in Rausu;*
  - *Local lifestyles that depend on nature and its productivity and sustainability.*
- **History of the area**
  - *The area near the Shiretoko Nature Center used to be a farmland*[8]*;*
  - *The history and changes in nature that have happened due to previous private use of land;*
  - *The story of the "Shiretoko 100m2 movement", a grassroots campaign to create a land trust to preserve the land and prevent it from being developed;*
  - *The fact that there is no farming anymore.*
- **Accessibility**
  - *Areas that are accessible and restricted in the national park;*
  - *Information on trekking to the north tip of the peninsula;*
  - *Places to go in and around the park, and how to get there.*

5.2 Challenges and threats

Fewer than half of visitors (40%) reported encountering messages about the challenges and threats facing Shiretoko. These messages reported by visitors can be organized into the following key themes.

- **Overtourism and humans as the biggest threat.** Examples of visitors' responses are shown within quotation marks:
  - *"Tourists do not follow the rules, getting close and taking pictures of animals is harming them."*
  - *"People are going off of the trails to avoid water, impacting vegetation."*

[6] Postcards featuring this story are prominently displayed in visitor facilities to raise public awareness that feeding bears can have serious and potentially tragic consequences.

[7] Shiretoko is the southernmost location in the Northern Hemisphere where drift sea ice can be observed.

[8] Some visitors also stated that the Goko Lakes area had previously been farmed; however, this is not technically accurate. Although the area was never converted into farmland, the lakes were historically accessed and used by people from nearby settlements.

- **Invasive species**
  - *"There are many invasive species, such as the water lily plant (incorrectly referred to by some as "lotus" plants), in the area that affect the ecosystem; people have to remove them."*
  - *"Invasive lilies and carp in Goko Lakes were brought by former people living here*[9]*."*
- **Climate change and global warming**
  - *"Due to global warming, there are less fish near the shore, so fewer bears come close to the shore."*
  - *"Warming climate and the ice decrease will have an impact cascade in the ecosystems".*
- **Overpopulation of deer and their impacts**
  - *"Deer population is increasing and affecting vegetation, impacting woodlands and farmers in the surrounding area."*
  - *"Deer are overpopulating the area because the (now-extinct Japanese) wolf is missing*[10]*."*
- **Human-bear conflicts**
  - *"Management of bears; it is difficult to deal with them when you want tourists to come here."*
  - *"Problems with bears, as the bear is a threat to tourists and they need bells when they hike around."*
- **Other themes:**
  - *Blakiston's fish owl impacted by habitat degradation, deforestation, and lack of dead wood (old standing trees). Lots of conservation efforts are required.*
  - *Endangered species (birds).*
  - *Trash.*

5.3 Positive outcomes or success stories

Only about 28% of visitors reported exposure to messages about positive conservation outcomes, which can be organized into the following key themes:

- **Creation of the National Park & World Heritage Designation.** Examples of visitors' responses are shown within quotation marks:
  - *"Decision to become a national park is a successful story that helps with protecting nature."*
  - *"UNESCO designation due to unique wildlife."*
- **Restoration, reforestation and the 100m2 movement**
  - *"Measures to restore land (areas including Goko Lakes)."*
  - *"Some areas are not wild landscapes, but are in the process of being restoration."*
  - *"There are efforts to use recycled wood to protect the forest, used on paths to the Furepe waterfall."*
- **Wildlife population is recovering and increasing (e.g., deer, woodpeckers, bears, orcas)**
  - *"Bears and other wildlife (deer, woodpeckers) are recovering, but other species may depend on climate."*
  - *"Sightings of orcas; not sure if this is positive for everyone, but it is for me."*

[9] The Goko Lakes area was historically used for recreation by nearby farming communities, during which water lilies and crucian carp were introduced, both of which are now considered invasive species. Water lilies are currently being removed as part of ongoing restoration efforts in Lake 1 (Ichi-ko Lake).

[10] The Japanese wolf (*Canis lupus hodophilax*), which became extinct following the colonization of Hokkaido, is thought to have previously played an important role in regulating deer populations.

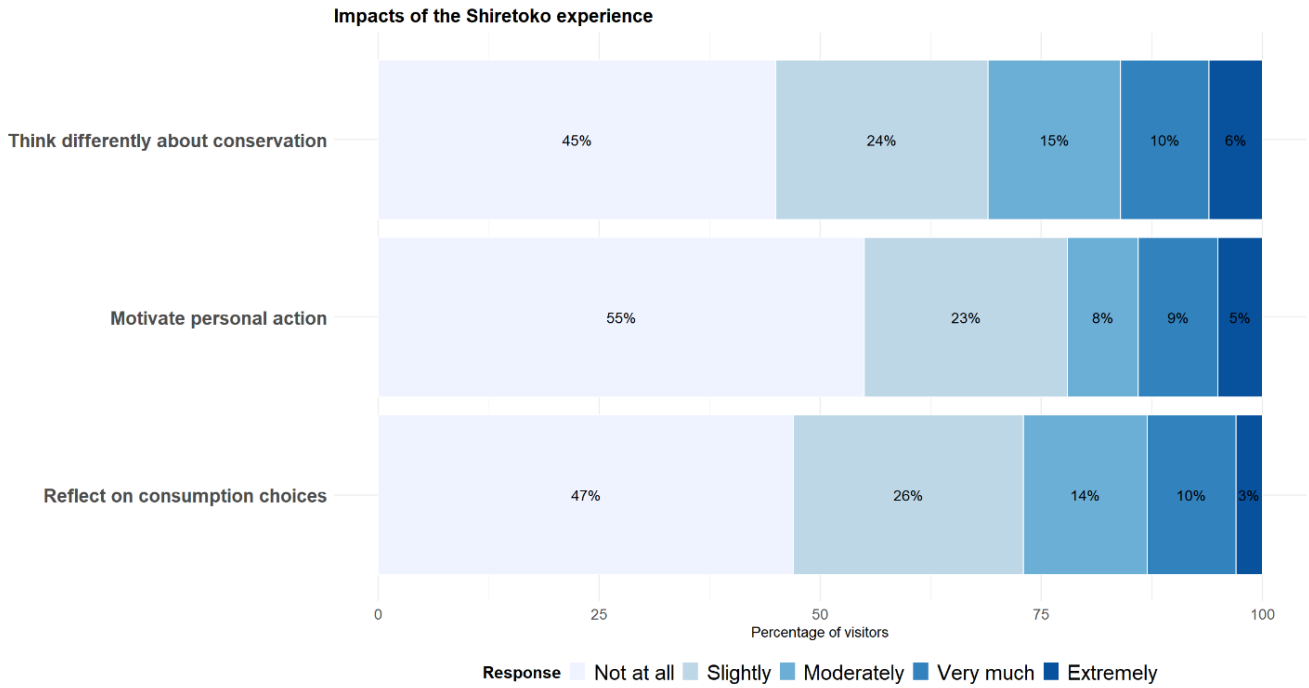
- **Conservation measures in place**
  - **Cleaning shoes:** *"Take anything from your shoes to avoid other species coming in, and it seems that this preserves the ecosystem."*
  - **Deer fence:** *"I also saw the deer fence to protect the trees from deer."*
  - **Well-limited trails:** *"Well-limited trail, so you don't impact the environment."*
  - **Remove invasive plants in Goko Lakes:** *"In the first lake, there is a volunteer to pick up flowers in the lake because they are not from here. They were brought in by tourists, but some volunteers came with a small boat to pick them up, the tour guide explained."*
- **Measures in place for coexistence with bears**
  - **Guided tours:** *"Do guided tours to avoid bear encounters. Those tours with guides reduce conflict."*
  - **Bear bells**
  - **Rangers:** *"Rangers monitoring the trails to check bears to avoid conflict with visitors."*
  - **Close trails if bear sightings**
  - **Bear education:** *"Everyone is aware of what to do, well done."*
  - **Tourist information:** *"Actually, telling what to do if you encounter them, explaining what the human relationship with bears is, using a funny style."*
  - **Coexistence with fishermen:** *"Fishers do not have rifles even when encountering a bear, so they live with them and do not kill them."*
- **Other themes**
  - *"Shiretoko's Toko-san mascot is well recognized and related to sustainable tourism."*
  - *"It is a clean park with helpful visitor centers."*
  - *"Hokkaido Wilds is a great and useful website."*

6. Impacts of the visit to Shiretoko

Visiting Shiretoko influenced visitors in multiple ways. Fifty-five percent reported that their visit to Shiretoko changed the way they thought about conservation ('from slightly to extremely'), 45% indicated that it motivated them to take personal action toward nature conservation (such as behavior change, advocacy, or volunteering), and 53% reported reflecting on their consumption choices (including food, travel, and product use).

However, **a substantial proportion of visitors reported no influence at all** ('not at all'): 45% indicated no change in their way of thinking about conservation, 55% reported no impact on their personal actions, and 47% reported no change in their consumption choices.

For some visitors, the lack of reported change was explained by the fact that they already had strong conservation awareness and consistent engagement in pro-conservation behaviors prior to visiting Shiretoko. For them, the visit primarily reinforced existing values rather than introducing new perspectives. For other visitors, the absence of change was often linked to factors such as limited time, insufficient exposure to educational materials, or a lack of concrete guidance on how to translate observations into action. In these cases, the visit was insufficient to prompt deeper self-reflection or behavioral change related to nature conservation.



7. Visitor feedback

7.1 Perceived missing messages

Visitors noted that some important topics relevant to nature conservation were missing or underrepresented, and these can be grouped into several key themes:

- **History of Shiretoko, changes over time and across seasons.** Examples of visitors' responses are shown within quotation marks:
  - *"How was Shiretoko in the past and how it can be in the future with climate change?"*
  - *"How landscapes look in every season, the changes of ecosystems."*
- **Land designation**
  - *"I would love to see some more information about land designation: this is a national park, so what does it mean in terms of logging, overdevelopment inside and around the national park."*
  - *"Explain more why it is necessary to have a national park, and why people should not get in."*
- **Climate change**
  - *"Impact of climate change in habitat and species."*
  - *"Climate change, your choices, less carbon footprint impact places, link lifestyle choices and nature are an opportunity."*
- **Consumption, waste management, recycling and plastic**
  - *"Buy a plastic water bottle to refill. Buying and eating local food. So, something more about reusing and local food would be great."*
  - *"There is no information about cars polluting, need to turn off lights, recycling and management (if they do something)."*
- **Message should be positive, visual and explain why**
  - *"Education but through positive and good messages, not always negatives saying what you cannot do."*
  - *"Explain why it is important to follow the rules, relate to conservation."*
- **Conservation: ongoing projects, ongoing research, marine wildlife and marine conservation**
  - *"More information about land use, ongoing research, protection efforts inside and outside the national park."*
  - *"Ocean marine conservation needs to be more present as Shiretoko is also about the sea, not only the land."*
- **Bears' population, impact of tourism, real danger from bears**
  - *"The tour guide did not mention the population of bears, are they stable, decreasing or not?"*
  - *"How the infrastructure of Goko Lakes impacts bears."*
  - *"More information about the real danger: need to rent spray, but it is a real danger as no bear spray is used in all his staff life history. More information and statistics on danger would be useful."*
- **Ainu people, relationship between local people and the park, coexistence with tourists**
  - *"More information on Ainu people is needed."*
  - *"Information about what people do here to conserve the area, how they live with tourists."*

- **Fishing**
  - *"Not much messaging about fishing and how they do not overfish, what they do to avoid overfishing and the impact of fishing to bears and other animals feeding on fish."*
  - *"I am missing a lot of information about fish, sea or ocean, and the relationship between people here and with fishing."*
- **Overtourism, impact of tourism, impact of tours**
  - *"Overtourism, there are big buses everywhere, potential impact of tourism, even in Kamuiwakka waterfalls I was surprised that buses were allowed to go there."*
  - *"It is good to go on boat tours, you can see nature without disturbance, but I wonder if you can affect sea life. Information about it would be good to know the pros and cons."*
- **Other specific themes:**
  - *List of invasive species.*
  - *Plant names.*
  - *Rules: a clear list of what you shouldn't do.*
  - *Signs saying don't speed on the road, speed kills wildlife.*
  - *Open and closed trails even before you get there.*
  - *Foxes and potential disease transmission (caused by the Echinococcus pathogen).*
  - *Current problems that Shiretoko is facing.*

7.2 Ideal role of visitor centers

Visitors explained that an ideal visitor center should serve **multiple roles**: providing information, practical guidance, conservation education, safety, cultural interpretation, and inspiring respect and support for the park. Visitor centers should be the first point of contact, offering details on wildlife, ecosystems, history, cultural heritage, and local communities.

Visitor centers should provide **practical support** including maps, trail info, weather updates, accessibility details, safety advice (including bear awareness), and equipment rental. Facilities like rest areas, toilets, cafes, and shops, along with interactive displays and multimedia, enhance comfort and learning.

Visitor centers should **foster appreciation for nature and conservation, and explain rules of respectful behaviors towards nature**, targeting different audiences, including children and international visitors, with multilingual information. The visitor center could be a hub for guided tours, volunteer opportunities, and conservation projects, connecting past, present, and future perspectives such as climate change and species recovery.

7.3 Limitations and suggestions

Visitors identified some limitations in their visit, primarily related to **access, information availability, language barriers, and limited options for independent exploration.** Many visitors wished for more opportunities to explore the park, including extended opening hours for visitor centers and access to less-developed areas. Access to nature was sometimes restricted, with few open trails and certain areas closed due to bear activity. While visitors appreciated clearly marked paths and safety measures, seasonal and weather variations were not always clear in advance, making trip planning challenging.

A recurring issue was the **limited availability of information in English**. International visitors struggled with practical details like booking guided tours, trail conditions, and necessary

equipment. Suggestions included multilingual signage, brochures, digital resources, and interactive guides or apps to improve understanding.

Visitors noted limited information on conservation issues and efforts, local culture, and Shiretoko's history. While guidance on basic responsible behaviors (e.g., staying on trails) was clear, broader conservation challenges and positive outcomes were less visible. Visitors suggested that the park could provide more information on threats (e.g., invasive species), and highlight successes (e.g., habitat restoration); this way, visitors would gain a deeper understanding of conservation challenges and achievements, motivating them to support and engage in ongoing preservation efforts. Although few in number, some visitors themselves mentioned that explaining the rationale behind the rules could help visitors better understand the conservation measures behind them and, together with messages encouraging reflection on their behaviors, consumption choices, and ways to support conservation (such as reducing plastic use or volunteering), could help translate awareness into action.

Visitors described practical limitations, such as limited free drinking water in some visitor centers, no bear-proof food lockers, cash-only payments, and restricted public transportation, prompting reliance on private vehicles. Some visitors suggested improvements in infrastructure, such as shaded areas, vegetarian food options, and clearer guidance on seasonal conditions. Other suggestions included the offer of child-friendly activities, and safe wildlife viewing opportunities (e.g., nature observation towers).

8. Research team recommendations

Our results suggest that visitors are overall satisfied with their visit to Shiretoko and the facilities available. In terms of conservation messages, visitors mostly reported information related to park regulations and safety instructions, and fewer mentioned messages about conservation challenges and positive outcomes. Similarly, some visitors agreed that their experience in Shiretoko did not change the way they think, behave, or make consumption choices related to nature conservation.

We would like to suggest the following recommendations to increase the potential to promote nature conservation awareness amongst visitors[11]:

1. **Expand information on threats,** such as climate change, invasive species and human-bear conflict, providing context-specific details.
2. **Share positive success stories**, including wildlife recovery, habitat restoration, and the benefits of UNESCO designation.
3. **Provide clear guidance for practical, hands-on actions and pro-conservation behaviors**, showing what visitors can do during their stay to support conservation efforts. For example, volunteering or participating in research and monitoring.
4. **Foster long-term engagement** between the visitors and the park, for example, through donations, newsletters, or follow-up programs.
5. **Link the visit to Shiretoko to sustainable consumption choices**, both during the visit and after returning home, including reducing single-use plastics, and adopting actions to mitigate climate change.
6. **Adopt a biocultural approach to conservation** [12] , highlighting the interdependence between people and nature, and providing information on history, cultural heritage, the Ainu people, and local lifestyles.

[11] Adapted from Fernández-Llamazares, Á., Fraixedas, S., Brias-Guinart, A., & Terraube, J. (2020). Principles for including conservation messaging in wildlife-based tourism. People and Nature, 2(3), 596-607. doi:10.1002/pan3.10114.

[12] Gavin, M.C., McCarter, J., Mead, A., Berkes, F., Stepp, J.R., Peterson, D., & Tang, R. (2015). Defining biocultural approaches to conservation. Trends in ecology & evolution, 30(3), 140-145. doi:10.1016/j.tree.2014.12.005

9. Acknowledgements

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Example of an interview with an international visitor at the Shiretoko Nature Center.