Japanese tourists now 'vanishing' from U.S.

By Robbie Dingeman
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A joint study by a tourism center at the University of South Carolina and the U.S. Department of Commerce's Office of Travel and Tourism Industries is examining the 'vanishing Japanese tourist' throughout the United States.

Rich Harriil, director of the Sloan Travel & Tourism Center in South Carolina, said the study will provide insight into the reasons behind the decline of Japanese visitors to the U.S. and offer some options for ways to lure them back.

He said the study will focus on where Japanese travelers are going outside of Asia, why they're choosing a particular destination, and how marketing to them can be improved.

The number of visitors from Japan is now on the decline after several years of heady growth.

Commerce Department data show that 3.7 million Japanese tourists visited the U.S. in 2006, down 5 percent from 2005, and 32 percent below the record of 5.4 million visitors set in 1997.

Japanese spent $16.03 billion during their U.S. vacations in 2006, and were the fourth-largest group of visitors to the U.S., behind Canada, Mexico and the United Kingdom.

In Hawaii, tourism officials forecast that the number of visitors from Japan will dip this year to 1.28 million after peaking at 2.2 million in 1997. One of the reasons cited for the decline is the increase in the fuel surcharge levied by Japanese airlines, which now tack on about $400 to each round-trip ticket.

In a telephone interview, Harriil said the study will cost between $100,000 and $150,000. He said it includes a telephone survey of about 1,200 Japanese residents of Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya. It also will include an online survey of 500 past visitors to the United States and 500 future potential visitors.
"We kind of want to get a handle on what's going on with this phenomenon," Harrill said.

"That's a lot of revenue, not only for Hawaii but for the entire U.S.," he said. Harrill added that the issue has broader implications for economic development and global relations.

"I think the broader picture is if we don't get a handle on this, it may affect or influence our business relationships," Harrill said.

"Lots of initiatives are started because people like what they see when they visit."

Harrill said the South Carolina university expects results of the study to be available in the spring of 2009.

"We know that globalization has kind of rearranged priorities for travelers," he said because they have access to so many areas. "Maybe their tastes are changing? What do they want to do now?"

Why South Carolina? Harrill said the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation Travel & Tourism Industry Center is a center of such research and outreach and is a joint effort of the College of Hospitality, Retail, and Sport Management and the Moore School of Business at the University of South Carolina, funded in part through grants from the New York-based Sloan Foundation.

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