Study views drop in Japanese tourists

By Allyson Bird
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Japanese tourists spend more money in the U.S. each year than visitors from any other country, but we're losing them in droves.

Armed with surveys, researchers at the University of South Carolina's Alfred P. Sloan Foundation Travel and Tourism Industry Center are on a quest to find out why.

Working with the U.S. Commerce Department's Office of Travel and Tourism Industries, USC hopes to learn how Japanese tourists choose a destination and how to better market U.S. cities.

Though the study aims to answer national questions, Sloan Industry Center Director Rich Harrill, a South Carolina native, said it will have more local implications, too.

"If this state is going to become globally competitive, tourism is the best way to introduce ourselves to the world," Harrill said.

The Sloan Industry Center, working with the Travel Industry Association and the Commerce Department, this month released a study on Chinese tourists.

That market surged along with the Chinese economy, the fastest-growing in the world. The study offered suggestions to better hook Chinese tourists, including marketing the U.S. as a safe and welcoming destination with rich history and culture.

"Here's why I think it's important to South Carolina: As far as China's concerned, we might not have a lot of Chinese tourists. But as a state we're invested in China and will depend on China as an import/export partner," Harrill said. "Tourism is a part of that friendship-building."

Most Japanese tourists, 68 percent, come to the U.S. for leisure, according to the Commerce Department. Another 20 percent arrive on business.

Nearly 5.4 million Japanese tourists visited the United States in 1997, but 10 years later that number had fallen to 3.5 million. The Commerce Department reports a 30 percent drop in Japanese tourists between 2000 and 2007 alone.

Japanese visitors are not this country's most common, falling behind Canada, Mexico and the U.K., but they spent more than $16 billion in 2006 alone, according to the Commerce Department.
Aiming to keep them, the new study will work in two phases, Harrill said. First, 1,200 adults in three Japanese cities — Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya — will complete a three-minute telephone survey about their travel habits and preferences. Then, 600 past travelers to the U.S. will complete an online survey.

Harrill said the goal is to explain the decline and also learn ways to reverse that trend.

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