

Characteristics of Public Astronomical Observatories in Japan Today

With nearly 300 facilities nationwide, Japan has one of the world's largest networks of public astronomical observatories. This poster presents key findings from the White Paper on Public Astronomical Observatories (2018) and explores their role in education, community engagement, and public astronomy.

“What”

What is Public observatory?

A public observatory is normally defined as “a facility equipped with observational equipment that offers public activities such as stargazing events.”

In simple terms, it is “a facility where the general public can observe astronomical objects and the night sky, primarily using telescopes.”

They vary widely in size and structure, ranging from science museums, hotels, and campgrounds to facilities attached to community centers, children's centers, and outdoor activity centers, as well as university research observatories that are open to the public.



▲ Large Telescope and Planetarium Hybrid Facility (Photo Credits: Misato Observatory, Wakayama)



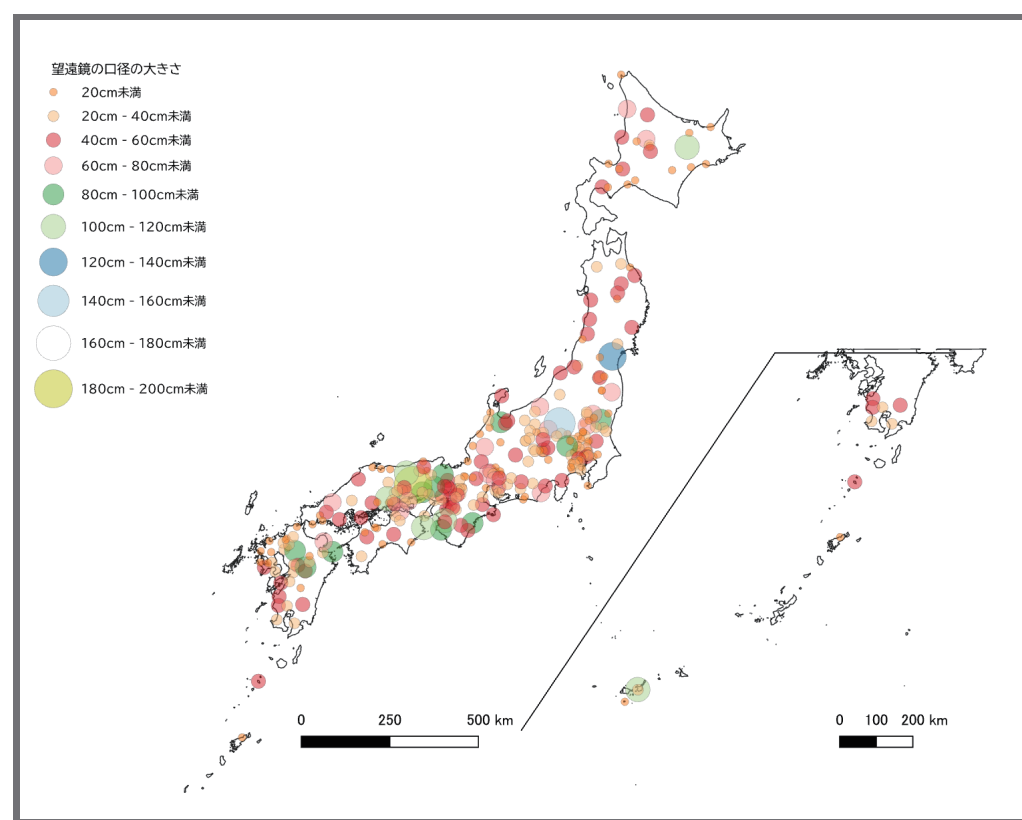
▲ Public Observing Program at a Science Museum (Photo Credits: Kawasaki Municipal Science Museum, Kanagawa)

“Where”

Where are Public observatories?

Public observatories have been built all over Japan. There are a total of about 300 of them. In particular, there are 10 facilities equipped with telescopes with diameters of 100 cm or more. Moreover, there are 44 facilities with telescopes ranging from 50 to 99 cm in diameter.

Almost anywhere people live in Japan, there's an opportunity to look through a large telescope relatively nearby.

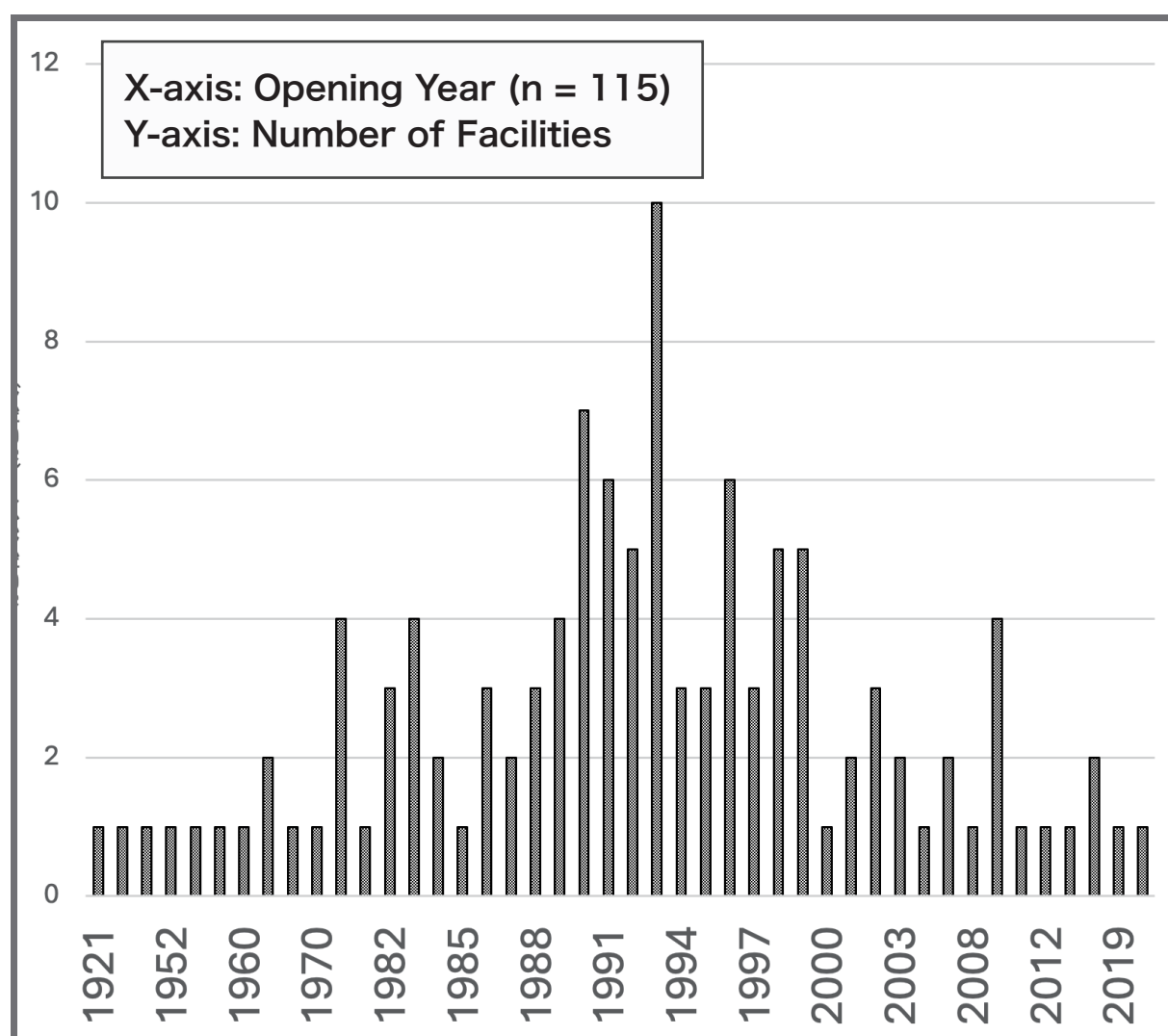


◀ Telescopes used for public observing programs across Japan. Circle size indicates telescope aperture. Adapted from the White Papers on Public Astronomical Observatories (2006, 2018) and Public Observatory Surveys (2024, 2025).

A larger version of this map is displayed elsewhere in the exhibition.

“When”

When were these public observatories established?



The first public observatory in Japan was established 100 years ago, in 1926. Then, in the 1990s, the number of public observatories surged, and today there are about 300 facilities.

◀ Annual Number of Public Astronomical Observatories Opened in Japan. Adapted from the White Paper on Public Astronomical Observatories (JAPOS, 2018).

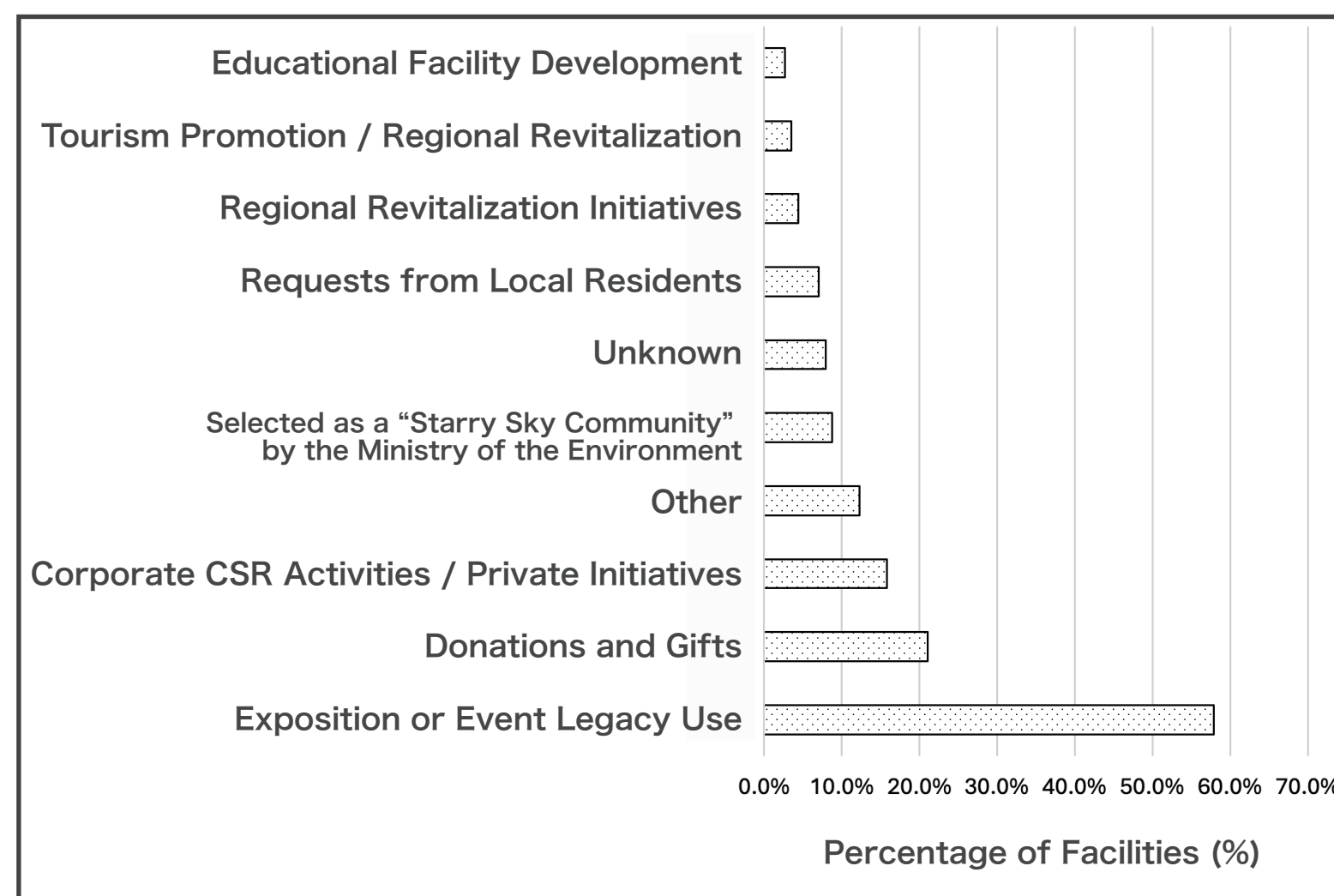
“Why”

Why was the public observatory established?

The most common reason for establishing a public observatory is “the development of educational facilities.” The next most common reason is “promoting tourism and revitalizing the local community.”

In other words, education is the primary purpose of these facilities, though some are likely also expected to contribute to tourism.

The public observatory was established as a result of regional revitalization initiatives (funded by grants from the Japanese government), requests from local residents, and the selected as one of the "Starry Sky Towns" by the Ministry of the Environment (reflecting growing awareness of environmental policies and issues in Japan).

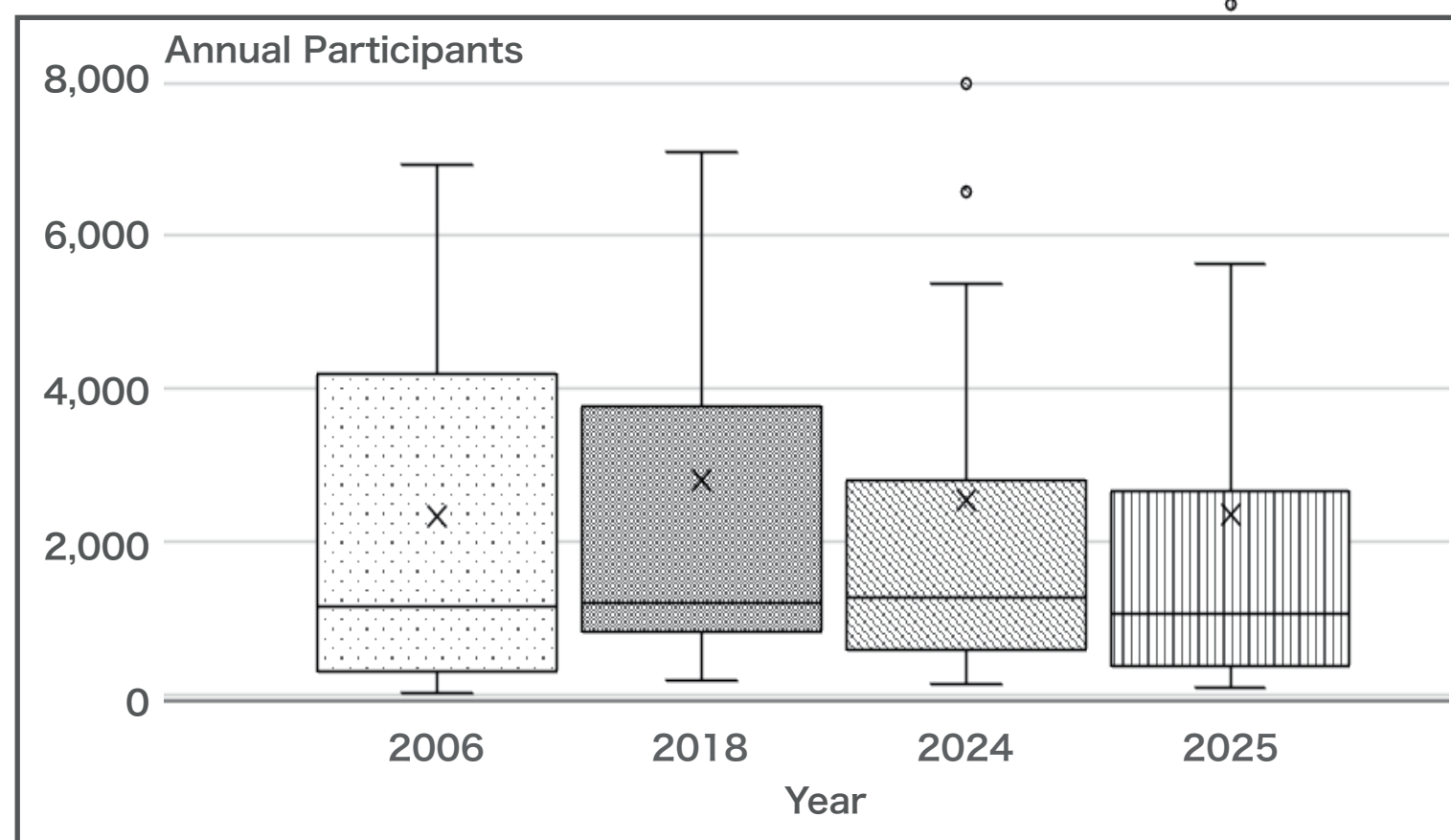


◀ Primary Motivations for Establishing Public Astronomical Observatories (n = 114). Adapted from the White Paper on Public Astronomical Observatories (JAPOS, 2018).

“Who”

How many visitors participate nighttime stargazing?

Looking at trends in the number of participants in nighttime stargazing events, the annual number of participants has remained relatively stable over the long term, even during periods marked by external factors such as changes in access to information due to the spread of the internet and smartphones over the past 20 years, activity restrictions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, and the diversification of public preferences. No extreme downward trend was observed in either the average or median figures, suggesting that demand for the observation experiences provided by public observatories has persisted even through changes in social conditions.



◀ Trends in Annual Participation in Public Observing Programs. Adapted from the White Papers on Public Astronomical Observatories (2006, 2018) and Public Observatory Surveys (2024, 2025).

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