

Japanese tourists down on Down Under

SYDNEY (Kyodo) Australia, with its beautiful Great Barrier Reef and cute koalas, was once seen as the destination of choice for Japanese on vacation.

Figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics released this week, however, have provided more evidence that the Japanese tourist industry in Australia, which boomed in the '90s, is in sharp decline.

The number of Japanese visiting Australia fell by 8.6 percent last year, even though the government invested millions of dollars in advertising to lure them Down Under.

The decline came as Australia posted a record year for tourism in 2006, with 5.5 million tourists pouring into country.

The year's growth of 0.6 percent was fueled by a surge in tourists from India, up 23 percent, and China, which rose 8.2 percent.

Tourism Minister Fran Bailey said she is concerned about the fall in Japanese tourists.

"The appreciation of the Australian dollar to the yen coupled with the slashing of aviation seats out of Japan by 9 percent is making the dream of an Australian holiday less of a reality for too many Japanese," Bailey said.

The number of Japanese tourists visiting Australia peaked in 1995 and has continued to fall steadily since 2004.

The government introduced an action plan worth A\$ 13 million aimed at Japanese, which included marketing the country as a "fresh" destination offering more than just the Great Barrier Reef and the Sydney Opera House.

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