

The Age - Melbourne - 27.7.10 Graham Gordon



An aerial view of the latest artfully planted rice paddies in the enterprising village of Inakadate. The tourism project suggested by hall clerk Koichi Hanada attracts 170,000 visitors a year.

PICTURE: NEW YORK TIMES

Colourful paddy artistry is a (rice) cracker of an idea

A go-ahead village plants itself on the tourism map, reports **Martin Fackler** from Inakadate, Japan.

NEARLY two decades ago, village hall clerk Koichi Hanada received an unusual request from his superior: find a way to bring tourists to this small community in rural northern Japan that has rice paddies and apple orchards but not much else.

The conscientious Mr Hanada spent months racking his brain. Then one day he saw schoolchildren planting a rice

paddy as a class project. They used two varieties of rice plants — one with purplish stalks and the other with green ones. Then it struck him: why not plant the coloured varieties in such a way to form words and pictures?

"I didn't know it would become such a hit," he said.

The result was what is now called paddy art, and it has been a big enough hit to put this

village on the map. Every year since 1993, the villagers have created pictures by using rice paddies as their canvas, and living plants as their paint and brush. As the village's creations have grown increasingly large, complex and polychrome, they have drawn growing media attention and hordes of tourists.

Last year, more than 170,000 visitors clogged the narrow streets of the community of 8450 mostly ageing residents, causing traffic jams and waiting for hours to see the living art.

The images are an amalgam

of high technology, painstaking perfectionism and an ancient attachment to rice. To create this year's football field-sized picture of a mediaeval samurai battling a fierce warrior monk, villagers used a computer model to place more than 8000 stakes to guide them in planting rice plants that have been genetically engineered to produce three more colours: dark red, yellow and white.

The images have become so intricate and detailed that the mayor, Koyu Suzuki, said visitors often ask if they are

actually drawn on the paddies with paints. He said it was the surprise factor that brought people here and the villagers believed they must produce ever more intricate pictures for tourists to keep coming back.

"We have no sea and no mountains, but what we do have plenty of is rice," said Mr Suzuki, 70. "We have to create a tourism industry using our own ingenuity."

Residents of Inakadate hope the paddy art will revitalise their declining village.

The paddies cost just

\$US35,000 per year to rent, plant and maintain. While the village does not charge visitors to see the paddy art, it does ask for donations, which last year brought in \$70,000.

Feeling that they have been left to fend for themselves by Tokyo's spending cuts, villagers said they must find ways to capitalise on the influx of visitors. Yozo Kikuchi, the head of the chamber of commerce, suggested souvenirs, which now include a mascot in the form of a smiling grain of rice named Little Mr Rice-Rice. NEW YORK TIMES