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Horticultural Overtourism in Tokyo: Coopetition for Successful Enticement of Visitors from Over- to Less Crowded Gardens

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Abstract: Garden managers face the dilemma of promoting and preserving their gardens. Overtourism in popular gardens can be solved by cooperating to entice visitors to alternative, less popular gardens. However, such an enticement strategy may not be successful because garden managers not only cooperate with but also compete against each other (i.e., coopetition). How can garden management practitioners forge a coopetitive relationship to encourage visitors to move from over- to less crowded gardens? Addressing this question, this study aimed to propose a successful coopetitive strategy to redistribute visitors. This study was drawn primarily from semi-structured interviews with garden staff of an overcrowded national garden and multiple less crowded metropolitan gardens. A thematic analysis of qualitative data revealed a lack of cooperation between national and metropolitan gardens and highlighted the former's aspirations for further growth despite perceived overtourism. This study proposes using the ambiguous cultural status of national and metropolitan gardens as a catalyst for coopetition between them, and contributes to the discourse on sustainable cultural tourism by broadening its scope and redressing the scholarly imbalance between an overemphasis on visitors' behaviour and a dearth of attention on practitioners of (horti)cultural tourism. Theoretical contributions are detailed at the end of this article.

Keywords: horticultural tourism; gardens; overtourism; Tokyo; coopetition; enticement of visitors; growth

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1. Introduction

Gardens are the nexus where culture and nature intersect. Some gardens attract many visitors regardless of their size [1–4], indicating that garden visiting is a popular outdoor leisure pursuit across the world [5]. When a garden is swamped with visitors, the crowds and congestion can harm its cultural and natural properties. This is an issue of overtourism, which threatens cultural sites [6] and causes a loss of authenticity [7]. Accredited gardens require effective protection measures. However, the managers of valued gardens face a dilemma between conserving them and communicating their cultural and horticultural significance. Therefore, horticultural overtourism is defined as a challenging situation in which the sheer volume of visitors makes it extremely difficult for garden staff to reconcile garden promotion with preservation.

One possible measure to overcome these opposing objectives (promotion and preservation) is to entice visitors from over- to less crowded gardens, although the feasibility has been questioned [8,9]. Visitor dispersal measures are premised on cooperation between saturated and other attractions; however, cooperation is often impeded by a competitive ethos [10,11]. Therefore, this study focuses on coopetition, a concept denoting simultaneous cooperation and competition [12]. How can garden managers forge a coopetitive relationship to encourage visitors to move from over- to less crowded gardens?

The purpose and outcome of this study were to articulate a successful scenario regarding coopetition between overcrowded and less crowded gardens and propose practical implications for how visitors to the former are induced to flock to the latter. Grounded in qualitative data drawn primarily from semi-structured interviews with garden staff

members, this study rigorously analysed what they perceived as an 'advantage' and offered a proposal for them to achieve sustainable cultural tourism without compromising their perceived advantage. Drawing inspiration primarily from discourses on touristic development of culturally accredited gardens in Japan [13,14] and cultural overtourism [6,15], this study proposed using the ambiguous cultural status of national and metropolitan gardens as a catalyst for coopetition between them.

This study makes threefold contributions to the literature on sustainable cultural tourism. First, contextualising overtourism within gardens enabled this study to shed light on the detrimental impacts of mass tourism on culture and nature. Since gardens are quasi-natural settings artificially created by humans, this study transcends a simplified binary between culture and nature, thereby broadening the scope of the cultural tourism discourse. Second, given the predominant scholarly emphasis on impacts of overtourism on residents [16–19] and visitor behaviour [20], this study focused on tourism practitioners and reconceptualised them as one of the leading players in sustainable tourism. Third, this study filled a gap in the overtourism discourse by investigating not only extremely popular attractions but also less popular attractions, which tend to be discounted by other overtourism studies. Globally, a handful of tourist attractions are phenomenally popular, but other attractions continuously lack visitors. Therefore, this study can remind practitioners and researchers of a global disparity between extremely popular and less popular attractions and contributes to the correction of scholarly imbalances in the overtourism discourse.

2. Literature Review

Although overtourism has recently become a buzzword and a hot research topic, the impact of mass tourism had already emerged during the 20th century [21,22]. This made it difficult to delineate the scope of the literature review. Ultimately, it focuses on the crossroads between overtourism and Japanese garden culture. In the following, the author overviews a discourse on overtourism and reviews the debate over the enticement of visitors from over- to less crowded attractions and the evolution of Japanese gardens from cultural heritage sites to tourist attractions. Informed by reviewed research works, a refined research question is presented at the end of this section.

2.1. Overtourism and Undertourism

Overtourism is a word denoting the multifaced detrimental impacts of mass tourism and is defined as 'the situation in which the impact of tourism. . . exceeds physical, ecological, social, economic, psychological and or political capacity thresholds' [23]. As clarified by other oft-cited definitions, overtourism negatively influences the 'perceived quality of life of citizens and/or quality of visitors' experiences in a negative way' [24]. One major issue associated with overtourism is damage to cultural property, including vandalism [6,15], which concerns practitioners in charge of the preservation and promotion of cultural properties, including officially accredited heritage sites [25,26]. Despite a growing academic interest in overtourism, there remains a scarcity of studies on undertourism, which is conceptualised as a polar opposite of overtourism [27]. Thus, undertourism is a paucity of tourists and a sharp decline in or even complete halt of tourism [28]. One theoretical implication is that overtourism mirrors a global disparity between saturated and unpopular tourist attractions, and this is precisely why visitors should be enticed from over- to less crowded attractions.

2.2. Enticement of Visitors from Over- to Less Crowded Places: A Debatable Solution

Overtourism can be resolved by moving visitors from excessively to less crowded places. However, whether this is a successful solution to overtourism remains debatable [8]. One criticism is that major tourist attractions are unmissable for tourists [9]. For example, the Palace of Versailles and its gardens are must-sees when visiting Paris. In addition, it is questionable whether less crowded, minor tourist attractions have the potential to

attract additional visitors. Therefore, one of the conditions for successful visitor dispersal is intrinsically oxymoronic: less crowded attractions must become popular. This condition would be infeasible without the support offered by popular attractions, suggesting complementary intentions of overcrowded attractions, which want to disperse the crowds, and less crowded attractions, which want to increase visitor influx.

Another reason for doubt about the feasibility of luring visitors from over- to less crowded tourist attractions is the rivalry between attractions, which mirrors the spirit of competition rather than cooperation [11]. Tourism attractions tend to compete against each other precisely because of their high substitutability [29]. Cooperation is a prerequisite for sustainable tourism planning and development, and is premised on reciprocity, which means a mutually beneficial relationship [30]. However, what saturated attractions consider as 'benefits' is debatable because of the multiplicity of perspectives. Whereas tourism degrowth campaigns are burgeoning among locals [31–34], tourism practitioners regard such campaigns as an increase in the likelihood that their rivals will win the competition. Therefore, striking a balance between cooperation and competition is challenging in redistributing tourists [35].

Despite the fierce competition between cultural tourism attractions, it is possible for them to cooperate because competition and cooperation are not mutually exclusive [10]. The term 'coopetition' refers to a situation in which multiple actors compete and cooperate simultaneously [12]. Thus, coopetition is the collaboration between multiple business competitors in a way that benefits all of them. Coopetition has drawn scholarly attention as a theoretical perspective from which sustainable tourism development is studied [35,36]. To the best of my knowledge, however, it has never been considered in the context of garden tourism. This gap in knowledge needs to be closed because the concept of coopetition can be leveraged to better understand horticultural markets in countries like Japan, where a few gardens attract the vast majority of visitors. The disparity between popular and other gardens manifests the competitive nature of garden tourism, whereas cultural and natural features shared by gardens indicate the possibility that they can cooperate with each other.

2.3. Japanese Gardens as Tourism Sites and Cultural Properties

According to Ihara [14], gardens in Japan began to be officially used as tourism resources during the early 20th century. An important milestone in the history of Japanese garden tourism was the 1919 legislation introduced to preserve historic landmarks (shiseki), places of scenic beauty (meishō), and natural treasures (tennen-kinenbutsu). This law, which was named Shiseki Meishō Tennen-kinenbutsu Hozon Hō (Law for the Preservation of Historical Landmarks, Places of Scenic Beauty, and Natural Treasures), clearly identified chomei naru kōen oyobi teien (famous parks and gardens) as one type of meishō and therefore had listed 87 gardens out of 91 as meishō until its abolition in 1950, when it was superseded by Bunkazai Hogo Ho (Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties).

Thus, the use of gardens as tourism resources in Japan is intertwined with legal acts to protect and preserve important cultural properties [13]. The Shiseki Meishō Tennen-kinenbutsu Hozon Hō was, and the Bunkazai Hogo Ho is, under the jurisdiction of the Agency for Cultural Affairs, which is affiliated with the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport, Science, and Technology. In other words, the Japanese Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport, and Tourism, which oversees tourism policies in Japan, barely promoted garden tourism until 2019, when the Ministry launched a new scheme aiming to collectively promote low-profile gardens in Japan [37,38].

Unlike low-profile gardens, few large gardens in Japan are highly valued. One quintessence of prestigious gardens in Japan is the award-winning Japanese garden attached to the Adachi Museum of Art. The museum has been awarded three stars in the Michelin Green Guide Japan [39]. Since 2003, its garden has been ranked first annually in the Journal of Japanese Gardening produced by an American publisher [40]. Described as a 'living Japanese painting', this 165,000 m^2 picturesque garden comprises moss, gravels, rocks, and other features [41]. As evidenced by such compliments and accreditations, this

garden is a prime and rare example of successfully valued gardens in Japan. In other words, there are disparities between culturally significant and other gardens in Japan.

The disparity between culturally significant and less significant gardens in Japan has important implications for countermeasures against overtourism. Prestigious gardens are popular and, hence, prone to overtourism. Overtourism in these gardens is resolved or prevented if visitors refrain from visiting and instead select less popular gardens. Thus, disparity is a precondition for the enticement of visitors from over- to less crowded gardens and is an ultimate reminder that the popularity of tourist attractions is determined by relativity [4]. Overtourism indicates not only extreme congestion in a specific locality, but also the paucity or even absence of visitors elsewhere (i.e., undertourism) [28].

As a countermeasure against cultural overtourism, practitioners have already attempted to redistribute visitors. To incentivise them to visit less crowded cultural tourism sites, Frey and Briviba [15] recommend the use of innovative visual technologies that virtually 'revive' people associated with both over- and less crowded cultural attractions. For example, virtual reality can generate an image of a person who owned multiple gardens and mix it with real garden landscapes. The concept underpinning such attempts is 'proximity'. This means not only a short distance between overcrowded and other attractions, but also cultural similarities between them [42]. Thus, it is reasonable to hypothesise that gardens culturally close to each other have the potential to disperse visitors. Based on this hypothesis, the research question presented earlier was refined: What is the (horti)cultural proximity enabling garden managers to forge a coopetitive relationship to encourage visitors from over- to less crowded gardens in Japan?

3. Materials and Methods

This study is part of a larger enquiry investigating multiple aspects of garden tourism in Tokyo. As data collection and analysis progressed, the author realised that the national garden in Eastern Tokyo was the only garden where overtourism occurred before COVID-19, whereas the management organisation of the metropolitan gardens did not report any overtourism-related issues. Consequently, the national garden became the primary focus of this study. Therefore, this study was conducted both inductively and deductively. The focus was narrowed down in a data-driven manner, and the topics investigated were guided by the research reviewed earlier. The details of the research design and context, data collection and analysis, and ethical considerations are explained below.

3.1. Qualitative Research Design

Research to date, particularly studies on tourism's impact on residents, are biassed towards quantitative measurements [43] because numerical indicators, such as carrying capacity [44,45], play an important role in the prevention and projection of issues caused by mass tourism [46,47]. However, overtourism is inherently determined by perceptions [48–51] and subjective judgement about 'how much tourism is too much' [52], meaning that more methodological efforts are required to delve into human subjectivity. Based on the assumption that subjectivity reflects socially constructed and multiple worldviews or realities [53], this study was designed as a qualitative enquiry.

Inspired by the notion that the imminence of overtourism is determined by human perception, the author considered whose perceptions need to be investigated. Clearly, existing research has focused on residents because tourism can threaten their quality of life [16–19,46,49–51], and on tourists because their behavioural change is key to the mitigation of seasonal crowds [20]. However, insufficient attention has been paid to tourism practitioners facing serious challenges, particularly in the context of cultural tourism.

Tourism practitioners' perceptions merit scholarly investigation because they are committed to and responsible for sustaining tourism. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to examine their perceptions. The author also conducted non-participant observations in gardens as a subsidiary data collection method to avoid overreliance on their subjective evaluations. The researcher's perspective was used to evaluate the imminence

of overtourism. Given the focus on human subjectivity, interview data were treated as a primary source of information, whereas visually observable data were treated as subsidiary information that complemented the interviewees' perceptions. Both sources of data were triangulated [54,55] to comprehensively address the research question.

3.2. Research Context and Sampling

This study focused on a national garden in the immediate vicinity of Shinjuku Station (A in Figure 1), the world's busiest station used by 3,590,000 passengers daily [56]. According to the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, Shinjuku is visited by 50.3% of overseas tourists [57]. Taking advantage of its location and inbound tourism boom, this garden has become popular. It attracted 2,191,381 visitors in FY2019, 814,514 in FY2020, and 1,264,734 in FY2021 [58]. The garden covers 58.3 acres, blending different horticultural styles such as French formal, English landscape, and Japanese gardens. This is a quintessential popular Japanese garden with the capacity to attract many visitors.

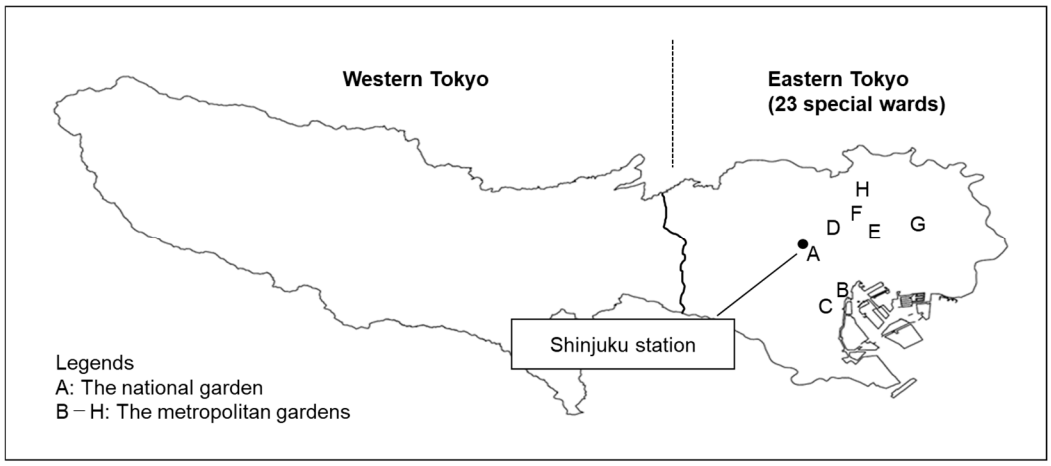


Figure 1. Location of gardens investigated.

The popularity of this national garden fuelled speculation of potential overtourism, and this speculation was confirmed by qualitative data regarding garden staff members' perception that overtourism occurred during busy seasons (as reported later). Therefore, crowd dispersal from this garden to less crowded gardens has become a topic of investigation. As reviewed earlier, less crowded attractions must have the potential to attract additional visitors, otherwise, crowd dispersal efforts would be ineffective. This precondition was satisfied by the metropolitan gardens in Eastern Tokyo, which comprise 23 special wards and are more developed than cities in Western Tokyo, which comprise 30 municipalities and towns.

All the metropolitan gardens in Eastern Tokyo were purposefully selected for this study (B–H, Figure 1) for two reasons. First, they were considered relatively popular and able to attract additional visitors from the crowded national garden. As the author reported elsewhere [4], municipal gardens in Western Tokyo were far less popular than metropolitan gardens in Eastern Tokyo, with an average of 7774 visitors in fiscal year 2021. This is much fewer than the number of visitors to metropolitan gardens in Eastern Tokyo, as Table 1 shows. Second, the geographical proximity of metropolitan gardens to the national garden was also why the metropolitan gardens were selected, because spatial closeness facilitates cooperation between tourism attractions [59]. This geographical feature was in stark contrast to 44 metropolitan parks in Eastern Tokyo, which are on the outskirts of the area. Therefore, the author deliberately focused on the metropolitan gardens, and this decision helped to delineate the scope of the analysis and situate this research specifically within the garden tourism discourse.

Table 1. The number of visitors to gardens in Eastern Tokyo (FY2019–2021).

	FY2019			FY2020			FY2021		
	#vis	**#OD**	**Ave.**	**#vis**	**#OD**	**Ave.**	**#vis**	**#OD**	**Ave.**
A	2,191,381	NA	NA	814,514	NA	NA	1,264,734	NA	NA
B	621,336	357	1740.4	146,525	208	704.4	147,890	227	651.5
C	135,621	357	379.9	40,412	208	194.3	42,086	227	185.4
D	309,248	357	866.2	96,385	208	463.4	109,324	227	481.6
E	152,379	329	463.2	39,901	208	191.8	50,202	210	239.1
F	618,746	357	1733.2	181,583	208	873.0	187,077	227	824.1
G	110,156	357	308.6	41,077	208	189.5	37,579	227	165.5
H	313,876	357	879.2	105,220	208	505.9	114,784	227	505.7
B–H Sum	2,261,362	—	—	651,103	—	—	688,942	—	—

Notes: A: the national garden. B–H: the metropolitan gardens. Legend: #vis: the number of visitors. #OD: the number of open days. Ave.: average daily number of visitors. NA: data not available. —: The totals of open days (#OD) and average daily visitor numbers (Ave.) were not calculated as they were unnecessary.

The national and metropolitan gardens share cultural themes. The national garden was originally gifted by Ieyasu Tokugawa (the first shōgun (ruler) of the Edo period) to Lord Kiyonari Naito, who served under him. This feudal period preceded a post-feudal era that witnessed rapid national transformation, commonly referred to as the Meiji Restoration, which terminated the Tokugawa regime and restored the Imperial regime. This occurred when Japan experienced drastic industrialisation and Westernisation, which are often described synonymously. When the locus of power shifted from Tokugawa to the Imperial family, the latter acquired the national garden and constructed a Western-style house, which is currently registered as a jūyō-bunkazai (significant cultural property). As with the national garden, the metropolitan gardens in Tokyo are also symbolic of the political turmoil, revival of imperial power, and industrialisation/Westernisation of Japan during the 19th century. For example, gardens B and C were originally owned by the Tokugawa family during the Edo (feudal) period but were acquired by the Imperial family after the Meiji Restoration. Gardens D and F also belonged to the Tokugawas but became the private property of the Iwasaki family, plutocrats who seized power during the rapid industrialisation and created garden E alongside a Western-style mansion, which is now designated as a jūyō-bunkazai. Other national cultural accreditations, such as shiseki (historic landmark) and/or meishō (scenic beauty), have also been bestowed upon the metropolitan gardens (Table 2).

Table 2. National cultural accreditations granted to gardens in Eastern Tokyo.

	Jūyō-Bunkazai	**Shiseki**	**Meishō**
A	✓		
B		✓	✓
C			✓
D		✓	✓
E	✓		
F			✓
G		✓	✓
H			✓

Notes: A: the national garden. B–H: the metropolitan gardens. Tick symbols (✓) show that a cultural accreditation is bestowed on a garden.

An overview of the national and metropolitan gardens in Tokyo demonstrates their complicated historical backgrounds and cultural features. Their ownership status has changed, and actors who seized power in modern Japanese society have incorporated Western elements into their gardens. The national and metropolitan gardens, officially acclaimed as culturally significant properties or heritage, manifest an ambiguity that cannot be described with one word. The gardens share the same cultural themes and values, which inspired the researcher to deduce that enticing visitors from the national to metropolitan gardens was feasible.

3.3. Data Collection

Qualitative data were collected from February to October 2022, primarily through semi-structured interviews with seven staff members of the national and metropolitan gardens (Table 3). Purposeful sampling was used to recruit information-rich interviewees [60], which were defined as those possessing sufficient knowledge regarding cooperation and competition between gardens in Tokyo. Therefore, this study prioritised top or middle managers over lower-level staff members, such as gardeners, because the former were in charge of relationships between their own and other gardens. Arguably, this sampling strategy aligned with the focus and aim of this study and, hence, enhanced its validity. To investigate as diverse perspectives as possible, the author recruited staff working at gardens (e.g., their directors) and headquarters of organisations designated to manage the gardens (e.g., area managers). Their perspectives differed because interviewees of the former cohort were motivated to develop their own gardens, whereas the latter cohort was assigned to oversee multiple gardens and, hence, were interested in the holistic promotion of the gardens they managed. The interviews were conducted in Japanese, in which the interviewer (author) and interviewees spoke their first language. The author conducted in-person and online interviews because COVID-19 had not ended at the time of data collection.

Table 3. Profile of interviewees.

	Age	Sex	Affiliation	Position
01	50s	M	An organisation designated to manage the national garden	Middle manager
02	40s	F	A ministry in charge of the management of national gardens	Middle manager
03	50s	F	An organisation designated to manage metropolitan gardens	Senior manager
04	20s	F	An organisation designated to manage metropolitan gardens	Middle manager
05	40s	M	An organisation designated to manage metropolitan gardens	Middle manager
06	50s	F	An organisation designated to manage metropolitan gardens	Senior manager
07	50s	M	An organisation designated to manage metropolitan gardens	Senior manager

Informed by research on the feasibility of enticing visitors from over- to less crowded attractions [8,9] and the cooperation or coopetition between tourist attractions [10–12,29,30,35,36], the author formulated questions and prepared an interview guide. Taking advantage of the conversational nature of semi-structured interviews [61], topics were flexibly changed depending on the interviewees' responses.

Non-participant observations were conducted in all gardens mentioned in the previous section to examine their popularity and the ways in which they were managed by the interviewees. In tourism studies, non-participant observations enable the observer to remain separate from tourism stakeholders who participate in research [62]. This method complemented interview data because it helped the author to collect visual data, which validated what interviewed garden management practitioners said. The author photographed many parts of the gardens, such as their entrances, cafés, featured plants and their surrounding areas, and the architecture designated as cultural property. Some pictures corroborated the perceptions mentioned by the interviewees and were therefore incorporated into a coding

scheme, which is detailed below, as visual representations of themes identified as a result of qualitative data analysis.

3.4. Data Analysis

Interview data were analysed by repeatedly listening to the interviews recorded in the first instance, enabling familiarisation with the interview data, to transcribe interviewees' comments for open coding [63]. To avoid loss or misinterpretation of the original meaning [64], the transcript was not translated into English during this initial phase. Although it gradually became easier to discern data patterns, themes worth reporting remained uncertain. This motivated the author to search the literature for relevant research that could guide him in the selection of themes to report. Consequently, the author encountered research works on the attempt to encourage people to move from over- to less crowded, culturally 'proximate' tourist attractions [15,42], which inspired the finalised research question presented earlier.

Formulation of the final research question enabled a narrowing of the scope of analysis and development of a coding scheme, comprising theme names, definitions, and abbreviations. Equipped with this scheme, the transcripts were revisited for coding or, more precisely, attaching labels (abbreviated theme names) to the transcribed interview data for categorisation [65]. Coded narratives were added to the coding scheme as quintessential examples of emerging themes.

Based on Boeije's [66] recommendation, the coding scheme was repeatedly revised until it accurately captured the interviewees' perceptions. To avoid possible discrepancies between my interpretation and the interviewees' intended meanings, I employed member checking, a measure to enhance the trustworthiness and authenticity of qualitative enquiries. This is a process where analysed data are presented to some research participants for feedback [67]. I requested the interviewees to validate the meanings elicited from the interview data. More precisely, member checking was used to avoid biassed interpretations of what interviewees said. Their feedback further improved the accuracy of the coding scheme, which was then translated into English.

3.5. Research Ethics

This study was approved by the ethics committee of the author's institution (reference number: 890). The author informed all interviewees about the purpose of data collection and their right to refuse the author's request at any time for any reason. All the interviewees consented to participate in this study. This manuscript reports their opinions anonymously to protect privacy. The extracts quoted from the interviews were shared with interviewees before submission. The collected data were password-protected and will be stored in secure online storage for 10 years after the completion of this study. This data management procedure was based on the internal rules of the authors' affiliation.

4. Results

This section first reports on perceived overtourism in the national garden and compares it with the less crowded metropolitan gardens. This highlights the difference between the national and metropolitan gardens in terms of the degree of crowding, and therefore, the latter's potential to host additional visitors for the sake of the former. However, the analysed data indicated an absence of cooperation between them. Finally, this section reports on a common challenge faced by overcrowded national and less crowded metropolitan gardens to explore feasible partnerships between them.

4.1. Perceived Overtourism in the National Garden

Staff members of the national garden reflected on the pre-pandemic period when the garden attracted more than 80,000 visitors daily during spring. Visitors gathered for ohanami, a traditional custom of appreciating the beauty of cherry blossoms over food and

drinks. They described the congestion during this season as 'overtourism' and reported the following issues as specific symptoms of overtourism:

- Crowds around entrance gates and cherry blossom trees;
- Queues for hundreds of metres outside the gates;
- Noise pollution in nearby neighbourhoods;
- Litter in the garden (particularly around the gates);
- Physical and financial costs incurred by staff classifying rubbish into designated categories (burnable, non-burnable, bins);
- Damage to the meadow where entry was prohibited (ill-mannered visitors trespassing and treading on the lawn);
- Visitors (pedestrians) walking through the red ('wait') signals outside the garden;
- Roads congested by unauthorised parking;
- Overuse of toilets and clogged drainage;
- Increased expenditure on material resources (toilet rolls, maps);
- Violation of 'no drinking' rules;
- Entry of ambulances blocked by the crowds;
- Theft of natural property (plants, insects) belonging to the garden;
- Unauthorised commercial photo shoots.

Clearly, the above-mentioned issues illustrate the interviewed garden staff member's perception regarding the occurrence and the severity of overtourism in this garden prior to COVID-19. To measure the likelihood of these issues, the garden management body had established a rule-of-thumb threshold of 25,000 visitors at any time. The number was automatically counted by a camera installed at the entrance of this garden because, to quote a staff member, 'congestion at the entrance was the most pressing issue'. Even if the likelihood of overtourism is accurately measured, it is not necessarily prevented, as explained by staff members:

> Our record-breaking number of visitors was 86,000 daily. The meadow was filled with visitors and was so dense that we could not even see the lawn; we patrolled the garden when it started becoming crowded. Before COVID-19, we inspected visitors' personal belongings at the entrance gates. Despite our efforts, some visitors secretly drank, as evidenced by empty alcohol cans left in the bins.

This comment indicates the difficulty of having the visitors abide by these rules. Moreover, requesting visitors to behave themselves was a cause of trouble. One interviewed staff member explained this point as follows:

> We received complaints from the local people about the noise that visitors made. In response, we made an announcement and asked visitors to refrain from drinking and jumping queues. However, this announcement was noisy, as the local people complained. We considered the volume of our announcement; however, it varied depending on the wind direction. There was no way to address these issues.

This comment describes countermeasures against overtourism that triggered side-effects, indicating the thorny and sticky nature of these issues. Staff members also introduced other countermeasures, such as placing large signs that demand visitors to adhere to the rules and desist from violating them (e.g., unauthorised commercial photography) and establishing police patrols around the garden. Despite these efforts, these problems were not completely resolved.

At the time of the fieldwork, the garden showed signs of the above-reported issues re-emerging. I observed a long queue outside the café and bins overflowing with rubbish (Figure 2). Both pictures were taken on a national holiday in May, around 3 p.m. when the garden was teeming. This café was part of a global chain and many people who seemed to be foreigners were in this queue. It was over 20 degrees Celsius, and many visitors bought drinks from this and other cafés, as well as vending machines. Clearly, the bins

were insufficient to contain the large amount of rubbish. Overtourism is an imminent risk in this garden, and there is an imperative need to prevent it.



Figure 2. (**Above**) A long queue in the national garden; (**Below**) Bins overflowing with rubbish.

One possible measure for preventing overtourism is to encourage visitors to move from the saturated national garden to less crowded ones. Thus, gardens unlikely to experience overtourism are required. This condition was satisfied by the metropolitan gardens in Tokyo, as indicated by staff members.

4.2. Crowded, but Not Overtourism: Situation at the Metropolitan Gardens

The severity of the overtourism risk in the national garden was further illuminated by comparing it with metropolitan gardens. Their staff members commonly expressed a relaxed attitude towards overtourism. According to them, their gardens become crowded in spring when cherry blossoms bloom, and in autumn when the foliage of Japanese maple and ginkgo trees turn red and yellow. They said, however, that 'the level of congestion was never serious to the extent that it needs to be described as overtourism' and, therefore, perceived overtourism to be improbable.

Staff members of the metropolitan gardens reported concerns regarding crowds. For example, one was concerned about the hardening of the ground because of the pressure accumulated by many visitors treading near popular plants, such as cherry blossoms. They also commented that the flow of visitors to popular plants is either slow or stagnant. Nevertheless, all staff members eventually reached the same conclusion, as noted above. As one remarked, 'this concerns me but is not as serious as overtourism'.

The above-quoted comments epitomise a common perception among staff members of metropolitan gardens. Although the horticultural features of metropolitan gardens occasionally attract many people, crowds and related problems never exceed the staff's subjective threshold of overtourism. This has several important implications. At least subjectively, metropolitan gardens have the additional capacity to alleviate overtourism in the national garden. However, there have been no such attempts, as detailed below.

4.3. Lack of Cooperation Between the National and Metropolitan Gardens

Despite the possibility of the national garden partnering with the metropolitan gardens to disperse crowds, there was no ongoing cooperation between them. Staff members of the national garden remarked that their aspirations for further growth were a reason for their lack of cooperation. A staff member from the national garden explained this point as follows:

> Our overall policy aims to increase visitor numbers to the area. As I said, visitors are concentrated during spring as this is the season of 'ohanami'. Therefore, visitor dispersal beyond spring is what we need to consider. During summer, the garden is open until 21:00. This is done to attract more visitors throughout the year (during seasons other than spring).

This quote shows that the management of the national garden attempted to increase visitor numbers despite perceived overtourism. Summer was of particular interest as visitor numbers decreased owing to the intense heat. Similarly, the management body of the metropolitan gardens mentioned their efforts to attract additional visitors during summer.

> We used to implement a promotional campaign during autumn but decided to implement it during summer because summer is a low season, whereas autumn foliage daws the attention of many visitors to our gardens. The Tokyo Summer Olympics in 2021 was a catalyst for this change. This year (2022), we will present visitors with facemask cases with unique designs printed on them.

To supplement this quote with background information, wearing face masks was still mandatory in many public places during 2022. The fact that the metropolitan garden management body created novelty items indicates that they collaborated with businesses besides the national garden. In addition, the metropolitan garden staff members who were interviewed explained their cooperation with a municipal botanic garden in Ibaraki Prefecture, on an exhibition of plants appreciated by a historically titled family whose members resided in both metropolitan and municipal botanic gardens. Even though working beyond the administrative barrier was not easy, the collaboration was catalysed by, to quote an interviewed staff member, 'a shared cultural and historical connection to the feudal family'.

The management body of metropolitan gardens also cooperated with non-horticultural organisations, such as a railway company that assisted the metropolitan gardens in implementing a stamp rally, a marketing gimmick encouraging people to collect stamps exclusively in one or more metropolitan gardens. A metropolitan garden staff member stressed the importance of collaborating with private companies.

> We collaborated with area management and entertainment companies on a series of illumination events that we previously organised by ourselves. However, collaborating with external bodies, such as private companies, enables us to host larger events and create innovative marketing value. Last year (when we were still under COVID-19 regulations), we conducted 'social distance digital

> projection mapping'. Visitors could see the design patterns emerging on the ground when they were socially distanced.

This extract implicitly reflects the interviewees' perception that cooperation with business sectors other than horticulture complements the cultural and horticultural features of gardens and attracts a wider range of visitors, including non-horticultural lovers. This offers important practical implications for increasing the opportunities of informing visitors about gardens.

4.4. A Common Challenge: Ambiguous Cultural Status of Gardens

Even though both national and metropolitan gardens are committed to communicating their cultural and natural values, they face a dilemma regarding how to accomplish this core mission. For the national garden, a challenge lies in the differences between staff members and visitors in terms of their interpretations of the garden. One staff member explained this point as follows:

> Our place is a garden. However, I do not think that visitors perceive it as a garden. They perceive it as a 'park'. We also know that many people will not visit if we promote it as a 'garden'. At some point, we designated one area as a 'playground' and started permitting the children to play there. {Interviewer: But you cannot promote this garden as a barbeque site, can you?} Definitely not. This is a dilemma, you know.

This staff member expressed some frustration when explaining this dilemma between seeking popularity or losing identity as a 'garden'. The national garden was popular among people who had picnics (Figure 3). If the organisation presented the national garden as a park, it would be inconsistent with its identity. Even though the organisation has permitted children to play in a designated area, barbeques are beyond their tolerance. Promoting the national garden as a 'park' may agree with visitors' interpretations but may also communicate the misconception that the organisation creates lenient regulations regarding its use, which exacerbates the issues reported earlier.



Figure 3. Families having picnics in the national garden.

There was similar ambiguity in the way metropolitan gardens were promoted. As discussed earlier, the history of metropolitan gardens reflects the political turmoil and societal changes that Japan experienced. This historical significance has made it difficult for the current management body of gardens to define their characteristics in one word:

> The history of our gardens dates to the Edo period when feudal lords (daimyō) possessed gardens as a symbol of their power. Succeeding eras, such as Meiji and then Taishō, witnessed a decline in feudal power. Therefore, labelling our gardens 'Edo daimyō' gardens only highlights one aspect of their history.

This interview extract is a reminder that the gardens' ownership status shifted from feudal lords ('Edo daimyō') to Imperial families or plutocrats who seized power in the post-feudal eras (revisit Table 2). Concisely describing the gardens as 'Edo daimyō' gardens is insufficient because the gardens existed during eras other than 'Edo' and were owned by powerful people other than 'daimyō'. Lengthy descriptions rather than simplistic labels are required to accurately illuminate their ambiguous historical background. However, reading lengthy texts is challenging for visitors whose primary interest is in seeing aesthetically pleasing plants or scenery.

An implication of the above-reported narratives is that both national and metropolitan gardens compromised the communication of horticultural values they perceive as authentic. Acquiescence to visitors' expectations and interpretations of gardens is a logical strategy for increasing their popularity. However, this perceived challenge can function as a catalyst for the successful enticement of visitors from overcrowded national to noncrowded metropolitan gardens. In the following section, why and how this can be made feasible are discussed by recapitulating the reported findings and contextualising them within the existing research reviewed earlier.

5. Discussion: Proposal for Effective Coopetition

The findings reported thus far illustrate perceived overtourism in the national garden in Tokyo before the COVID-19 outbreak. Some of the reported issues, such as damage to and theft of horticultural property, are analogous to vandalism in overcrowded cultural tourism attractions [6], which may cause attractions to lose their authenticity [7]. Inspired by studies on the redistribution of tourists from overcrowded cultural sites to alternatives credited with 'proximate' cultural features [15,42], orientating visitors towards alternatives to the national garden is worthy of consideration. Possible alternatives in Tokyo garden tourism are the metropolitan gardens because, according to their staff members, these gardens are not prone to 'overtourism'. This contrast between the overcrowded national and less crowded metropolitan gardens indicates the possibility that both can benefit from the movement of visitors from the former to the latter.

Despite the aforementioned prospects, the findings show a lack of cooperation between the national and metropolitan gardens. Cooperation is an ideological basis for an attempt to encourage visitors to overcrowded attractions to visit those less crowded [11] and is premised on reciprocity, win–win situations in which two groups exchange advantages [30]. A mutually advantageous scenario for Tokyo gardens may be a reduction in crowds in the national garden and an increase in the number of visitors to the metropolitan gardens. However, the reported findings showed complexities regarding what the interviewed staff members of the national garden considered beneficial.

The reported narratives of national garden staff confirm previous research on seasonality in the overtourism context [20,68] as the narratives shed light on seasonal crowds during spring when people attended for ohanami. Even though the national garden staff members perceived the congestion and pertinent issues as 'overtourism', they did not show any intention to reduce visitor numbers during this season. Contrary to the degrowth movement gaining momentum in response to overtourism [31–34], they aspired to increase visitor numbers throughout the year. In other words, a decrease in visitor numbers during spring is disadvantageous, unless it is surpassed by an increase in visitor numbers during other seasons.

Therefore, whether the national garden can attract additional visitors during seasons other than spring is the key to successful cooperation between the national and metropolitan gardens. The data suggest that both national and metropolitan gardens attempted to encourage additional visitors during summer, meaning that they were fishing in the same

pond. Even if the national and metropolitan gardens cooperate during summer, their cooperation may be underpinned by a competitive ethos (i.e., coopetition) [12].

Coopetition between the national and metropolitan gardens is facilitated by shared cultural proximity. A factor regarding cultural similarity was suggested by the shared challenges faced by garden management practitioners. A staff member of the national garden reluctantly mentioned the common misconception that the garden is perceived as a park. Despite the implication that visitors do not value the cultural and horticultural significance of the national garden and do not treat it with caution, their staff were hesitant to promote it as a 'garden' because it owed popularity to non-horticultural lovers. In the same vein, staff of the metropolitan gardens mentioned a dilemma over how to promote their gardens because their multifaceted historical backgrounds make it difficult to describe them with a simple expression, such as 'Edo-daimyō garden', which merely captures one point in their complex history.

The ambiguity in the way staff members present their gardens reflects a struggle to communicate their horticultural values such as their multifaceted historical development. As reviewed earlier, gardens are tourism resources but, above all, valued cultural properties worthy of conservation [13,14]. Additional marketing efforts are required to make the historical values of national and metropolitan gardens as visible as their natural features, such as cherry blossoms. This is because aesthetically appealing flowers and foliage in the gardens visually attest to their official meishō (scenic beauty) status, whereas their accreditation as juyōbunkazai (significant cultural property) or shiseki (historical importance) is unclear unless visitors read written explanations on leaflets or boards.

The collaboration narrative between the metropolitan gardens and a private enterprise on projection mapping events resembles the 'revival' of people associated with cultural tourism attractions, which emphasises possibilities offered by cutting-edge visual technologies [15]. Such technologies can provide garden visitors with immersive historical experiences. For example, mixed-reality technologies can merge computer-generated images of feudal lords, who owned the national garden, with actual garden scenery so that visitors wearing a head-mounted display can observe the lords strolling around and appreciating plants in the garden in a mixed-reality environment. Ultimately, visitors must be notified that the following episodes are available in metropolitan gardens and, consequently, are encouraged to visit them and see how the transition of garden ownership from the lords to the Japanese Imperial family or plutocrats represents the vicissitudes of the feudal regime.

Briefly, the shared historical background of the national and metropolitan gardens can serve as the content of cultural tourism experiences, which augments aesthetically appealing garden landscapes and makes visitors conceive of the gardens as 'gardens' representing complex political turmoil in feudal and modern Japan. The proposed mixed-reality tourism diversifies markets for garden visits because it caters to non-garden lovers. Therefore, it is envisaged that it will revitalise the garden tourism market and stimulate competition among gardens in the same area.

Extra fees should be charged for the aforementioned mixed-reality experiences, along with normal entrance fees. Offering these two options to visitors enables gardens to explore a potential market for more expensive but enhanced quality tourism experiences without compromising visitor numbers. The oft-suggested change from quantity to quality in tourism development [19] is inconsistent with the intention of garden staff, who endeavour to attract additional visitors. Even if countermeasures against overtourism are imperative, they must be devised and implemented in ways that agree with the inclinations of tourism practitioners.

6. Conclusions

What is the (horti)cultural proximity enabling garden managers to forge a coopetitive relationship to encourage visitors from overcrowded to less crowded gardens in Japan? To answer this question, this study analysed qualitative data drawn from interviews with

staff members of the national and metropolitan gardens in Eastern Tokyo and from non-participant observations of those gardens. Data were contextualised within relevant studies to consider possible enablers of visitor dispersal. As an outcome, this study proposes the use of the ambiguous cultural status of the national and metropolitan gardens, which are a legacy of their complex history, as the content of mixed-reality tourism experiences. The combination of actual horticultural assets and virtually revived owners of the gardens has the potential to motivate visitors to venture beyond the extremely crowded national garden and simultaneously engage those gardens in competition. Therefore, the ambiguous cultural status shared by the national and metropolitan gardens enables coopetition.

6.1. Theoretical Implications

Given the disproportionate focus of scholarly work on the impact of mass tourism on residents [1–19] and on visitor behaviour [20], this study focused on tourism practitioners assigned to manage gardens as resources for horticultural tourism. The reported findings, particularly their urge to increase visitor numbers, inspired the author to question the one-sided conceptualisation of tourism practitioners as a menace to sustainable tourism development. What needs to be sustained is not only residents' lives and environmental soundness, but also practitioners' missions to communicate the cultural value of their attractions. Advocates of the tourism degrowth concept [31–34] may conceive of practitioners' aspirations for further growth as accelerators of overtourism. Arguably, however, such aspirations must be reconceptualised as a salient element of sustainable cultural tourism.

The discourse on visitor dispersal presumes that mitigating overtourism is necessary. However, this assumption was questioned when garden management practitioners' paradoxical attitudes towards overtourism were analysed. Although coopetition was thought to be a useful conceptual framework for enticing visitors from the overcrowded national to less crowded metropolitan gardens, garden managers' perceptions suggest that coopetition would be useful for achieving further quantitative growth. Therefore, the findings suggest that practitioners would continue to endeavour to increase visitor numbers until issues caused by crowds reach their subjective saturation point, which is inextricably intertwined with tourism seasonality. Therefore, this study reveals that temporally perceived overtourism is not a sufficient condition for coopetition between overcrowded and less crowded tourist attractions.

6.2. Practical Implications

Based on the reported findings, this study suggests that garden management practitioners in Eastern Tokyo make more efforts to inform prospective garden visitors of the less occupied situation of metropolitan gardens because it incentivises them to prioritise metropolitan over national gardens in Eastern Tokyo. Metropolitan gardens should be promoted as tranquil settings where visitors can relaxingly appreciate the beauty of plants and rich historical backgrounds without being disturbed by other visitors. In addition, this study suggests that cooperation between national and metropolitan gardens is facilitated by non-horticultural firms, which can mediate the rivalry between the two garden management organisations. This was evidenced by the reported narrative of metropolitan gardens collaborating with a botanic garden outside of Tokyo, and railway and entertainment companies. The involvement of non-horticultural businesses is also essential to the implementation of the proposed coopetitive strategy because it requires expert knowledge of subject fields other than horticulture, as detailed below.

6.3. Limitations and Research Prospects

Since the proposed solution has not yet been implemented, its effectiveness could not be evaluated by this research. Therefore, a prospective avenue for future research is to conduct interdisciplinary action research on the implementation and evaluation of the proposed solution. Coopetition between gardens needs to be strategised by multiple experts in horticulture, Japanese history, and visual technologies who can jointly trans-

late the ambiguous cultural status of the national and metropolitan gardens into visual images in a way that harmonises with garden landscapes. Tourism researchers can be intermediaries between the national and metropolitan gardens because they have no stake in the competition between them and, hence, can induce them to cooperate in the proposed solution. To increase the chances of communicating the horticultural values of gardens, the onus is on tourism researchers to orchestrate the involvement of all parties.

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