

Not My Fault: Recovery slow seven years after Japan quake, tsunami

Lori Dengler/For the Times-Standard
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Sunday marked seven years since a magnitude 9.1 earthquake spawned a tsunami that devastated the Tohoku region of Japan. It's an in-between remembering, halfway between the major memorial activities of five years and the decade one. The date was recognized by a smattering of articles, mainly in the Japanese press, noting progress in the ongoing struggle to recover. For the coastal cities and towns in Fukushima, Miyagi and Iwate prefectures, it has been a time once again to remember all that was lost.

I visited Miyagi and Iwate on a post-tsunami reconnaissance effort in 2011. I arrived in Japan six weeks after the earthquake, as soon as the State Department allowed scientists to travel to the affected area. I spent ten days with colleague and friend Megumi Sugimoto, a tsunami researcher who was then at Tokyo University, visiting some of the hardest hit areas to study factors that had exacerbated or reduced impacts. Today is a good time to revisit three of them and underscore that the disaster did not end when the waves receded on March 11. It continues to this day.

- Yuriagi, a town just north of the Sendai Airport. A portion of my notes from May 4th, 2011: "Then out to the hardest hit area – the extremely flat land within a half-mile of the coast. This was the most devastated area we've seen yet. Water heights in this region exceeded 30 feet and more than 1000 people died. Whole blocks were leveled with an occasional structure partially standing. One woman commented while picking through the debris at her home site, isn't this interesting, but it isn't ours so we shouldn't take it."

Today, Yuriage is still largely empty, but disaster reconstruction projects are beginning to move forward. The land has been artificially raised about seven feet above the old ground level and the construction of new roads and dwellings has begun but almost no residents have returned. This is part of the larger problem to permanently resettle evacuees. The government estimates that about 75,000 people are still in temporary housing throughout the tsunami-affected area.

- Minamisanriku, 45 miles NE of Yuriage on Shizugawa Bay. My notes from May 6th, 2011:

"A particularly tragic story played out at the City's Disaster Prevention Center. Keri Luna, a city official kept at the microphone announcing to the public that a tsunami was coming. Until she was finally overwhelmed. Of the thirty people on the fourth floor of the building, only 10 survived. Her body was found only a few days ago. Perhaps the saddest part of the story is that the building is only a five minutes walk from high ground and if everyone had headed to the hill instead of the building, they all would have survived."

The Disaster Prevention Center in Minamisanriku became one of the most widely photographed images of the disaster. The three-story steel-frame structure was built to resist strong earthquake shaking and intended to be the nerve center of the disaster response in the town. My most recent visit to the town was in November 2013 on the day that memorial ceremonies were being held before its scheduled demolition the next day. The demolition never took place, the prefecture stepping in to maintain the site until 2031, when the community may again be allowed to consider what to do with it. The fate of this building illustrates the conflicts between local and regional government and the issues of what should be preserved as a memorial. For the people of Minamisanriku, it is a constant reminder of what went wrong in 2011 and all the people who were lost.

- Rikuzentakata, 45 miles NNE of Minamisanriku on Hirota Bay. Notes from May 7th, 2011:

"Rikuzentakata is the southernmost city in Iwate Prefecture. It sits on a flat plane at the end of an elongate bay that appeared to funnel the tsunami three to four miles inland up narrowing river valleys. It made me think of Orick and the mouth of Redwood Creek with about 23,000 more people. The sea walls were obliterated. Wood frame buildings were obliterated. Steel frame buildings were obliterated. The only structures left standing were reinforced concrete, and if you were lucky enough to be in one of those, you needed to be on the fifth floor or higher to survive."

In those early days right after the disaster, Rikuzentakata made efforts to communicate its situation with the rest of the world. I started following their Facebook page soon after so that I could learn about the recovery process. Two years later, I would use that Facebook page to connect with Amya Miller and the City after the boat belonging to the High School was found in Crescent City. That began a connection between Crescent City and Rikuzentakata that has become stronger with the years,

leading to a Sister School relationship and a Sister City that is expected to become final this year.

The 2011 Japan tsunami didn't just impact Japan. The tsunami caused damage in many areas of the Pacific. In Northern California, Citizen's Dock in Crescent City was destroyed and Noyo Harbor in Fort Bragg suffered significant damage. The only death from the tsunami outside of Japan was a man swept out to sea from the mouth of the Klamath River: Dustin Douglas Weber, 25.

On March 28, Del Norte, Humboldt and Mendocino Counties will conduct a Tsunami Warning Test as part of our preparedness efforts for the next tsunami that comes to our coast from far away. More about that in next week's column.

Note: Complete Blog posts from the 2011 Japan trip and previous reconnaissance trips are posted at <http://www2.humboldt.edu/rctwg/blog>

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