

## **World Tsunami Awareness Day: Each of us could save the rest**

Lori Dengler/For the Times-Standard

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Today is International Tsunami Day. You won't hear about it on the news because it doesn't mark a catastrophe. The date was chosen to remember the "Inamura no hi" or Rice-Sheaf Fire and how one person's awareness and quick thinking saved a village.

In the early winter of 1854, a magnitude 8.4 earthquake struck Japan's Kii Peninsula off the coast of central Japan. After the earthquake, Goryo Hamaguchi, an elder in the village of Hiro, set fire to piled sheaves of newly harvested rice to get the attention of villagers near the coast and guide them to high ground in the darkness. The 1854 tsunami caused damage and casualties, but his actions saved many in Hiro. It became part of Japanese folklore and was recounted by Lafcadio Hearn in 1897 in one of the earliest stories about Japan in the English language.

Yuki Matsuoka, head of the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, explained this choice, "Rather than selecting a memorial day or a tragic day, such as 11 March or 26 December, 5 November was selected as a 'forward-looking' day when many lives were saved due to proactive actions."

Last March I visited the Kii Peninsula. I was in Japan for part work and part vacation. The work was participating in the five-year remembrance of the 2011 tsunami. The vacation was walking part of the 9th century Kumano Kodo historic pilgrimage trail to shrines and temples on the Kii Peninsula. But as often happens when I travel, play and work merged as we traveled by train through Hirogawa, the modern town in the site of Hamaguchi's village.

I learned about this area from the USGS publication "The Orphan Tsunami of 1700" (downloadable at <https://pubs.er.usgs.gov/publication/pp1707>), where written records of the 1700 tsunami have helped to pin down the date of the last great quake in California and the Pacific Northwest. The publication also talks about other tsunamis from the region and one page is devoted to the Rice-Sheaf Fire. I often talk about Hamaguchi's actions when talking to school groups and as our train passed Hirogawa, it dawned on me that this is where the story took place.

I tried to imagine what it must have been like in the darkness of that winter night 162 years ago. The staked sheaves of rice on the hillside behind the town and the steep forested hills rising abruptly behind illuminated only by the moon and a few flickering lanterns. And then the ground lurching, rudely jolting them out of their peaceful evening. Earthquakes are not uncommon in Japan and two smaller tsunamis had occurred within the six previous months. They knew how to evacuate, but Hamaguchi's startling fires on the hillside helped to overcome any reluctance they may have had to leaving their warm homes on a chilly night.

November 5 also marks the one-year anniversary of Humboldt State University Press with the release of "The Extraordinary Voyage of Kamome. A Tsunami Boat Comes Home". We intentionally chose World Tsunami Awareness Day to launch this sweet story about kindness and hope in the aftermath of disaster. The intent of World Tsunami Day is to be forward looking, to focus what we can and should do to keep ourselves and our families safe before the next earthquake, tsunami or other disaster strikes. A primary aim of the book is to create a positive, safe environment to encourage talking about preparedness among families and in the classroom.

Kamome is the small boat that belonged to a high school in Japan, was caught in the 2011 tsunami, drifted for two years across the Pacific, landed in Crescent City and, through the efforts of Del Norte High students, returned to Japan. It has connected communities on the opposite sides of the Pacific and launched a student exchange. Del Norte High students visited Japan in 2014 and in February of this year. Japanese students visited Crescent City in 2015 and a second group will be coming in January of next year. Both students and adult hosts learn from each other's experiences the importance of keeping preparedness on the front burner.

Today, in the spirit of World Tsunami Day, tell your friends and family about the story of Goryo Hamaguchi and how knowing the right thing to do in a moment of crisis really can make a big difference.

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