

ABSTRACT

On March 11, 2011, the northeast coast of Japan suffered an earthquake of unprecedented 9.0 magnitude followed by tsunami waves that destroyed seaside hamlets and farmland in five coastal prefectures. Recovery efforts have been complicated by radiation leaks at the tsunami-hit Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant. Tourism – cast as both casualty of the disaster and key to post-disaster recovery – represents a key node of public discourse on the disaster. In this article, I examine the role of tourism in emergent popular understandings of the “3.11” disaster, recovery, and reconstruction. The discussion focuses on the early development of post-disaster tourism and discourses that support tourism development. Particular attention is given to the convergence of tourism and disaster recovery under the auspices of “volunteer tourism.” The discussion raises critical questions about how differently positioned individuals and groups in Japan and abroad are approaching, analyzing, and developing solutions to the disaster, as well as the changing meanings and impacts of tourism in local communities.

KEY WORDS: disaster recovery, volunteer tourism, media analysis, Japan

The Disaster and Its Immediate “Tourism Aftermath”

On March 11, 2011, the northeast coast of Japan was rocked by an earthquake of unprecedented 9.0 magnitude. The quake, which sent workers streaming into the streets and temporarily halted the subway system in Tokyo, was followed by a series of tsunami waves that destroyed seaside hamlets and farmland in Iwate, Miyagi, Fukushima, Ibaraki and Chiba prefectures. Workers at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant struggled to stabilize the facility’s six reactors whose cooling systems failed after being bombarded by tsunami waves more than 30 feet high. Government bans on consumption of spinach, milk, and beef produced in affected areas, and the detection of higher-than-normal radiation levels at water processing plants outside Tokyo, contributed to an undercurrent of fear discernable throughout Japan and abroad. Dubbed the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake by the Japanese government, the events of March 11th and the ensuing nuclear crisis have been branded “3.11” (pronounced *san-ichi-ichi*) by citizens.¹

Tourism, cast as both casualty of the disaster and key to post-disaster recovery, has emerged as a key node of public discourse on 3.11. In a “white paper” to the Japanese Diet, the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport, and Tourism reported that nearly half of all reservations for travel and accommodations during March and April were cancelled countrywide following the disasters (Japan Tourism Agency [JTA] 2011b). Meanwhile, the Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO) reported that in April,

foreign visitors to Japan were down more than 60 percent from the previous year, the largest decline since records began in 1964 (NHK 2011a). A general mood of self-restraint (*jishuku*) was blamed for domestic trip cancellations, while “harmful rumors” regarding the radiation danger were blamed for the drop in foreign visitors.

Soon, the national tourism industry began vigorously promoting tourism, drawing on the nostalgia-laden Japanese cultural concept of *tasukeai no seishin* (“spirit of mutual aid”) (JTA 2011a). The first post-disaster domestic travel promotion campaign was launched on April 21 utilizing the slogan “*Ganbarou Nippon!*” (“Never Give Up, Japan!”), while urging touristic consumption for purposes of economic recovery. The media reported that Japanese youth were traveling in great numbers to Tohoku to assist with clean-up efforts and reconstruction (e.g., Huffington Post 2011; NPR 2011; Wall Street Journal 2011b), and travel agencies began offering “Volunteer Japan” tour packages, representing a new turn in the industry.²

I examine the dual role of tourism – as both victim and savior – in emergent popular understandings of the 3.11 disaster, recovery, and reconstruction, as well as some of the potential impacts of post-disaster tourism on local tourism providers and community residents. Japanese discourses on post-disaster tourism strike a familiar chord, drawing on and building national narratives of collective hardship and solidarity that have been central to postwar formulations of Japanese identity. Centering on the sparsely populated hamlets of coastal Tohoku, the dis-



course blends nostalgic yearnings for traditional Japanese culture and village life, a theme that has resonated in domestic tourism since at least the 1970s (Creighton 1997; Ivy 1995; Robertson 1991), generating complex connections between national identity, disaster, and tourism.

Post-3.11, this richly layered discourse has found new expression in emerging forms of “volunteer tourism.” A recent concept in Japan, volunteer tourism is linked in the public imagination to a generation of young people who have been criticized as lazy, selfish, and apathetic. After 3.11, young volunteers are said to represent a new social and political awakening, even as local tourism providers are criticized for catering to tourist voyeurs who yearn to see tsunami-devastated areas for themselves. Drawing on media reportage, scholarly ethnographic accounts, and personal accounts posted through social media, I examine the convergence between tourism and reconstruction efforts as an uneven and politically charged process, raising critical questions about how differently positioned domestic and global actors are developing solutions to the disaster. The discussion is not always linear due to the immediate and ongoing nature of the crisis. However, critical study of the events, imagery, and language of 3.11 is essential at the current moment, as opportunities for conducting *in situ* ethnographic fieldwork are opening up, and while official accounts of the disaster have not yet been thoroughly codified.

Situating Discourses on Disaster and Tourism

Anthropologists approach natural disasters as complex social phenomena occurring at the interface of the social, environmental, and technological (Oliver-Smith 1996; Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 1999; Gunewardena and Schuller 2008). Within this literature, disasters are explored as “contexts for the creation of political solidarity, activism, new agendas, and developing new power relations” (Oliver-Smith 1996:310), although analyses of the tourism industry’s role in post-disaster recovery are rare (cf. Stonich 2008). Media and tourism, as purveyors of disaster narratives, and as the means by which persons not directly affected by a disaster may experience the tragedy, are critical to understanding the social dimensions of disaster because of “their potential to mobilize popular sentiment and collective action, and even their capability to witness or offer testimony” (Kleinman and Kleinman 1996: 1). Tourism in places of disaster engages multiple and diverse narratives of tragedy, while promoting particular interpretations of events and silencing others. Sather-Wagstaff (2011) argues that the motivations, experiences, and interpretations of tourists at Ground Zero in New York and other sites of mass trauma, popularly referred to as “dark tourism” (Lennon and Foley 2000), are part of the complex

processes of recovery and remembrance. Visiting sites of disaster is a powerful way for individuals to viscerally experience events that have had a defining impact on their lives and identities. Counter to popular and scholarly notions of dark tourists as rubber-neckers lured by the macabre as a form of entertainment, Sather-Wagstaff argues, “The sense of curiosity that these visitors have is not one for seeing where people died and taking some kind of morbid pleasure in this act but a simple curiosity about what the site actually looks like to literally make the event real rather than as mediated through the news” (2011: 75).

While World War II sites have been major tourist attractions in Japan since the early postwar, disaster tourism and especially disaster-volunteer tourism as defined and practiced in the West, is in its infancy. In Japan, volunteerism has been described as weak, and it has been claimed that Japanese society lacks a tradition of private philanthropy, depending instead on family to provide support for the needy. Although government tax laws have been unfavorable toward non-profit organizations, independent volunteers have played an important role in local communities throughout the postwar period (Avenell 2010). Kage (2011) explains that 20th century disasters such as the 1923 Great Kanto earthquake and the 1995 Kobe earthquake were followed by a surge of voluntarism and significant restructuring of Japanese civil society (see also Aldrich 2011).

What aspects of Japanese tourism culture contribute to the recent emergence of disaster-volunteer tourism? In *The Tourist*, Dean MacCannell posited that individuals embarking on touristic journeys are primarily driven by a quest for “authenticity” that is missing in their daily lives (1999; orig. 1976). In Japanese contexts, this quest has primarily manifested in nostalgic longings for Old Japan (e.g., Ivy 1995; Creighton 1997; Guichard-Aguis and Moon 2009). In particular, the concept of *urusato* (literally “old village,” but evoking the warm, nostalgic feelings of “hometown”)—pervasive in Japanese travel brochures, mass media advertising, and government planning rhetoric—embodies “authentic” Japanese culture and society as it is imagined to have existed in pre-modern rural farming and fishing villages (Robertson 1991; Creighton 1997). Rural landscapes, forested mountains, rice fields, and thatch-roofed farmhouses evoke the affective relationships and sociabilities presumed to characterize life in such settings—including compassion, camaraderie, tradition, and even motherly love (Robertson 1991).

Furusato imagery is carefully manipulated within the domestic travel industry. References to specific places are avoided so that any rural location may symbolically be appropriated as one’s own *urusato* (Creighton 1997). Village *matsuri* (festivals) have been revived and invented





throughout Japan, most notably in urban and suburban areas, to attract tourists and induce “*furusato*-mindedness” in local citizens. However, as Robertson’s account of a government-created festival in Tokyo demonstrates, planning and participation in new *matsuri* may provoke and reinforce local sectoral and factional differences (Robertson 1991). As Robertson argues, *furusato-zukuri* (“native place-making,” including *furusato* imagery in tourism advertising) is always “a political project through which popular memory is shaped and socially reproduced” (1995: 15).

Somewhat at odds with the *furusato* boom but still part of the quest for “authenticity,” Moeran reported in 1983 that group travel and sight-seeing packages were gradually being replaced with a new emphasis on individual travel and travel for purposes of recreation and experience. Younger tourists, in particular, were interested in travel that promised opportunities for “participating with one’s own skin” (*jibun no hada ni sanku suru*). With the growth of “rural tourism” in the 1990s, experiences sought by these travelers came to include staying and working at farm inns, picking apples, harvesting rice, collecting local wild vegetables, fishing and weaving. These are activities which contribute much-needed low-cost labor to local farms and therefore can be classified as “volunteer tourism,” but which have almost never been discussed in these terms. Post-3.11 disaster-volunteer tourism then represents a new convergence of voluntarism and domestic tourism in Japan.

The following discussion develops more contextualized understandings of post-3.11 tourism, including volunteer tourism, through a discussion of Tohoku as an unusual tourism “site.”

Tohoku in the Touristic Imagination

The natural beauty of Tohoku was enchanting, but the towns and villages proved a little disappointing. I could not help recognizing that the old Japan I have long sought has been rapidly disappearing. Westernization and urbanization are taking its toll on the lifestyle of even the most remote locations in Japan (Mariko Watanabe, email message quoted in Berger 2010: xv).

The Tohoku region encompasses six prefectures—Aomori, Iwate, Miyagi, Akita, Yamagata, Fukushima, and Niigata—which make up the northeastern third of the main island of Honshu. Surrounded by water and craggy coastlines on three sides, with the Ou Mountains and several minor ranges running north-south at its spine, the region has stunning scenery, numerous natural hot springs, and long, cold winters with heavy snowfalls. Despite extensive agricultural and infrastructural development in the 19th and 20th centuries, the region suffers from lingering perceptions of

backwardness, while at the same time local artisans are recognized as among the few remaining practitioners of “traditional” Japanese crafts and culture.

Developed as the nation’s rice production center following World War II, Tohoku was also exploited for low-cost labor, with workers migrating to work in Tokyo factories. During the 1970s, local communities began to invite electric power companies to build nuclear power plants, which offered jobs and state subsidies. Like other rural areas in Japan, the region has a rapidly shrinking and aging population, and a series of village amalgamation laws have caused the decline of small retailers and public transportation services, negatively impacting regional tourism (Traphagan and Thompson 2006). Not surprisingly, the 3.11 disaster has worsened this situation considerably.

Sites in Tohoku that attracted significant numbers of tourists prior to 3.11 included the Jomon period ruins at Sannai Maruyama in Aomori, the folklore-related sights of Tono village in Iwate, the scenic Matsushima coastline in Miyagi, the frontier castle town of Aizu Wakamatsu and pottery village of Aizu Hongō in Fukushima, and the feudal period samurai district in Kakunodake, Akita Prefecture. Drawing on the popular view of Tohoku as quintessentially traditional, the *furusato* motif was manipulated skillfully to lure Japanese tourists to appreciate the natural beauty of the region, enjoy the many hot springs and ski resorts, and to consume an imagined past via heritage tourism.

Post-3.11 Tourism in Tohoku

Following March 11th, 25 percent of the 285 registered hotels and inns in the six Tohoku prefectures suspended operations, including eight facilities that were heavily damaged (JTA 2011b). Tourists affected by the closures were moved to other prefectures in accordance with the national Disaster Relief Act. Existing disaster and safety net funds were implemented, along with a special 3.11 recovery fund to provide relief to small and medium sized businesses affected by the earthquake and the Fukushima nuclear plant accident. Additional loans were made available through the Japan Finance Corporation. The direct and indirect economic effects of the March 11 disaster on the region’s tourism industry have been significant, and the JTA asserts that redeveloping tourism will contribute mightily to the region’s economic recovery due to its potential to generate employment (JTA 2011b).

Tourism in Tohoku is being embraced by the Japanese government not only for its economic benefits, but also for its symbolic value. As an example, on May 18, Environment Ministry officials announced the combination of six national and regional parks along the Sanriku coast into a single national park that will symbolize the area’s reconstruction (NHK 2011b). According to the report, the new park will





feature observation platforms where people can learn about the disaster, as well as trails for emergency evacuation that link beaches with communities and mountains. The Reconstruction Design Council's June 25 report to the Prime Minister contains the following statement regarding tourism in a newly developed Tohoku:

It is expected that local tourism resources including natural views of the beautiful sea, etc., the rich local food culture, indigenous cultural assets such as festivals and shrines and temples, and brands including national parks and World Heritage sites will be widely utilized to create new tourism styles that are only possible in Tohoku and transmit the "Tohoku" brand to the entire country and the entire world (Reconstruction Design Council 2011).³

Chairman Iokibe Makoto spoke at length in an interview about a proposal to construct a "hill of hope" from tsunami debris that would serve both as a memorial to those who died in the disaster and as a barrier against future tsunamis (Wall Street Journal 2011a).

Reporting on the proposed national park, NHK cited without additional commentary the Environment Ministry's plan to hire disaster-affected fishermen and farmers as tour guides in the new park. What plans exist for the reconstruction of local fisheries and farming itself? An interview with Iokibe provides some detail: "We should give priority to the local people who have suffered, but since the population is declining and the sea in that area is abundant in natural resources, there aren't enough local people to make the fishing industry prosperous" (McCurry 2011). The Council has recommended redeveloping the Sanriku coastal fisheries along a new model: "To revitalize the region's fishing industry, more than 200 ports should be consolidated and major ports equipped with piers for large deep-sea fishing ships, seafood processing facilities and a distribution center needs to be established" (Reuters 2011). Implementation of the Council's recommendations is likely to further displace local fishermen operating on a small scale. Cross-analysis of even this limited set of articles thus reveals the complexity and contradictions, as well as the inequalities among various local stakeholders involved in the development of post-disaster reconstruction and tourism, a topic that anthropologists are well-positioned to explore (Stonich 2008; Wallace 2005).

During the same time period as coverage of the new national park, the media amplified the debate surrounding local businesses that were *already* engaged in activities that might be construed as "recovery tourism" in affected localities. An Asahi Shimbun article reported that Sanriku Railway Company is currently dispatching employees as guides for local municipal officials, contractors, and other organi-

zations planning visits to sites devastated by the tsunami (Asahi Shimbun 2011). Railway officials arrange for overnight tours of five disaster-hit sites for groups of 10 or more people, providing guide services and arranging for bus transportation and accommodation. Calling the company's new service "controversial," the newspaper cites employee concern that they may be seen as "cashing in on local people's misfortunes" and the protest of one resident who allegedly complained that the company was "placing disaster-hit areas on parade." The report then added, "But Sanriku Railway concluded it needs the income, be it small, now that the earthquake and tsunami put its very survival on the line." The report concludes, "Even before the disaster, the company reported losses for 17 consecutive years due to the falling population in its service areas. The company estimates that up to 18 billion yen will be needed to restore operations after suffering damages in 317 locations from the earthquake and tsunami. The company and local governments along its railway lines are calling on the central government to foot the bill." The suspicious tone of news coverage of private companies engaging in tourism activities contrasts sharply with the neutral tone of coverage of government-led reconstruction projects.

News coverage concerning volunteerism and volunteer tourism in Tohoku has been equally inconsistent, consisting mainly of sentimentalized community interest stories and first-hand accounts penned by journalists who have participated in volunteer trips. Periodic reporting of overall numbers of volunteers and the organization of volunteer centers in Tohoku has appeared, as well as stories concerning the problems caused by the influx of large numbers of volunteers into the region. In preparation for the upcoming Golden Week holiday, for example, Yomiuri Shimbun ran a piece essentially warning volunteers against "inundating" municipalities affected by the disaster.

Offers of help have been so numerous that some local governments have decided to temporarily stop accepting volunteers—partly because they were not prepared to handle the flood of people expected during the holiday period and also to prevent overcrowding and confusion on the roads.... The (Ishinomaki) city government was spooked by the prospect of a huge surge in volunteers. Anticipating more than 2,000 people could inundate Ishinomaki during Golden Week, the city government worried whether it would be able to organize them all (Yomiuri Shimbun 2011).

By mid-June the press reported 450,000 volunteers had traveled to Tohoku since the disaster (The Nikkei 2011).





On Twitter and other social media, volunteers describe shoveling sludge from beneath the floorboards of homes and shops, scraping dried mud off Buddhist temples, cleaning residue from family photographs, and hauling unusable appliances to community junk heaps, all the while interacting with local citizens who have lost their property, livelihoods, and loved ones. Twitter, the only available media immediately after the earthquake, was used to disseminate information about emergency phone lines, tsunami alerts, altered train schedules, and the status of friends and family. As relief and recovery efforts moved forward, volunteers in Tohoku tweeted about their motivations and experiences. Top Tour Corporation (Tokyo) and other travel agencies offering volunteer tours also advertised their Tohoku tour packages via Twitter and other social media.² Yomiuri staffwriter Fumiko Endo participated in a three-day, two-night volunteer trip to Miyagi Prefecture. She wrote, "I wanted to see the reality of the devastated areas with my own eyes, so I could comprehend the disaster in more depth. As I have neither a car nor enough free time to register for regular ongoing volunteer duties, I had searched online for short-term volunteering expeditions" (Endo 2011).

Volunteer participation like Endo's has been recognized and praised by the Reconstruction Design Council, even as it is reformulated as service to the nation:

The way in which so many people, including the members of the Self-Defense Forces, came from around the country to engage in dedicated relief activities is truly an inspirational example of *linkage* and *mutual support* being put into practice. If all the people of Japan join in ongoing efforts to support the reconstruction of the Tohoku region, it will serve to nurture "hope" for the revitalization of Japan and make it easier for everyone to identify with (Reconstruction Design Council 2011: 9; italics added).

The italicized terms, *linkage* and *mutual support*, refer to a central goal of the Reconstruction Design Council's plan, developing strong *kizuna*, or interpersonal bonds, in communities under reconstruction. The Council writes,

(H)ow do we resolve comprehensive issues in the context of a compound disaster?... (T)hrough "linkage" activities to other people and things. Linkage comes in many forms: people to people, community to community, company to company, municipalities to prefectural and national governments, local communities with other communities at home and abroad, eastern Japan with western Japan, and country to country.... The gentle support of the national, prefectural, and municipal

governments of the various modalities of the cultures of the communities will allow the community members to reconfirm the depth of their *kizuna* (2011 8, 24).

The concept of *kizuna* is evocative of the *furusato* theme discussed earlier. Both quotes from the Council's report also reveal a barely-concealed attempt at redirecting individual volunteer efforts and community/private plans for reconstructing localities toward an overall goal of revitalizing the national collective. Critics of the Council's plan point out the many problems Tohoku faced even before 3.11 that were a direct result of national policies that placed the region in service to the nation, and particularly Tokyo (Oguma 2011).

Conclusion: Ethnographies of Tourism in the Wake of 3.11

Critical analysis of media and personal accounts of post-disaster tourism in Japan reveal the complexities and inequalities involved in post-disaster recovery and reconstruction. While the surge of civic engagements of Japanese citizens volunteering in Tohoku has earned the admiration of foreign journalists, the local tourism infrastructure is informally criticized for putting disaster on display. Meanwhile, the Reconstruction Design Council's report clearly represents an attempt at bringing volunteer-related travel into the national narrative. Ultimately, the diversity of knowledge, experience, and interests of those involved in disaster-volunteer tourism is contributing to an emerging collective memory of the 3.11 disaster. With regard to the role of tourism and tourism discourses in post-disaster Japan, there are a number of questions that must be asked: What worldviews underlie the various discourses related to post-disaster tourism? What political and ideological frameworks? What social and moral imperatives?

For anthropologists there is an immediate need for careful ethnographic research, including perhaps participatory work as/alongside volunteer tourists, in the communities of Tohoku. A number of factors currently constrain possibilities for foreign researchers in Tohoku. These include the hesitancy of international funding organizations and universities to approve research in a region that continues to be perceived as "dangerous" due to ongoing problems at Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant. With the easing of the U.S. State Department travel advisory in early October, the outlook for local research possibilities is improving.⁵ Participant-observation and in-depth community surveys, coupled with critical analysis of media and other textual sources, will greatly contribute to our understanding of the various stakeholders involved in local community development through tourism. This includes urban volunteer tourists, industry advertisers and providers, government regulators and ideologues, local business persons, and residents of Tohoku.



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Touring Tohoku...

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Notes

1. In Japan, dates are written with a dot rather than a slash—thus, 3.11 rather than 3/11. Calling to mind the events of September 11th, 2001 (*kyū-ichi-ichi* in Japanese), the moniker succinctly conveys the sense of horror and shock experienced by viewers of the tsunami media footage. For an examination of the linkages between Japan's 3.11 and 9/11, see R. Taggart Murphy's discussion of the shared status of 3.11 and 9/11 as "hinges of history" and as examples of government negligence (Murphy 2011).
2. Tour packages were developed for domestic and foreign travelers. Companies offering "Volunteer Japan" tours to the Tohoku region include InsideJapan Tours (U.K.), H.I.S. International Tours (Los Angeles), and Toptour Corporation (Tokyo).
3. The Reconstruction Design Council, comprised of prominent academics, industry leaders, and prefectural governors, was established by Prime Minister Naoto Kan in April and charged with developing a comprehensive plan for reconstruction of areas devastated by the 3.11 triple disasters.
4. A sample Top Tour itinerary includes roundtrip chartered coach from Tokyo, accommodation in a Japanese ryokan (traditional inn) in Matsushima Bay, evening meals and several lunches, and a multilingual tour guide. In the case of cancellation of volunteer activities due to rain, sightseeing in Matsushima and Hiraizumi is arranged. The company's website states that there will be no sightseeing in devastated areas. Inside Japan Tours (U.K.) also provides rain boots, rubber gloves, a cap, dust mask, and dust proof goggles on its tours. Companies offering volunteer tours partner with Japanese NGOs working in the region.
5. The EASIANTH listserv is one avenue through which U.S.-based scholars are developing research projects in collaboration with Japanese universities and in-country colleagues. The Digital Archive of Japan's 2011 Disasters at Harvard University also promises to become a valuable clearinghouse for media and ethnographic data on the 3.11 disasters. Meanwhile, study abroad programs to Japan are resuming, many, including the Metropolitan State College of Denver program, with an added volunteer component.

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