

## Japan - How one village defied the tsunami

Decades ago, a mayor never forgot how fast sea could turn

Wednesday 18 May 2011, by [Japan Times](#) (Date first published: 18 May 2011).

FUDAI, Iwate Pref. – In the rubble of the northeast, one small village stands as tall as ever after the tsunami. No homes were swept away. In fact, they barely got wet.

Fudai survived thanks to a huge wall once deemed a mayor's expensive folly and now vindicated as the community's salvation.

The 3,000 residents living between mountains behind a cove owe their lives to a late leader who saw the devastation of an earlier tsunami and made it the priority of his four-decade tenure to defend his people from the next one.

His 15.5-meter floodgate between mountainsides took a dozen years to build and meant spending more than ¥2.4 billion in today's yen.

"It cost a lot of money. But without it, Fudai would have disappeared," said fisherman Satoshi Kaneko, 55, whose business was ruined but is happy his family and home are intact.

The gate project was criticized as wasteful in the 1970s. But the gate and an equally high seawall behind the community's adjacent fishing port protected Fudai from the waves that obliterated so many other towns. Two months after the disaster, more than 25,000 are missing or dead in the Tohoku region.

"However you look at it, the effectiveness of the floodgate and seawall was truly impressive," current Fudai Mayor Hiroshi Fukawatari said.

Towns to the north and south also braced against tsunami with seawalls, breakwaters and other protective structures. But none were as tall as Fudai's.

The town of Taro believed it had the ultimate fort—a double-layered 10-meter-tall seawall spanning 2.5 km across a bay. It proved no match for the March 11 tsunami.

In Fudai, the waves rose as high as 20 meters, as water marks show on the floodgate's towers. So some ocean water did flow over but caused minimal damage. The gate broke the tsunami's main thrust. The two mountainsides flanking the gate also offered a natural barrier.

The man credited with saving Fudai is the late Kotaku Wamura, a 10-term mayor whose political reign began in the ashes of World War II and ended

in 1987.

Fudai depends on the sea. Fishermen boast of the seaweed they harvest. A white-sand beach lured summer tourists.

But Wamura never forgot how quickly the sea could turn. Massive earthquake-triggered tsunami flattened the northeast coast in 1933 and 1896. In Fudai, the two disasters destroyed hundreds of homes and killed 439 people.

"When I saw bodies being dug up from the piles of earth, I did not know what to say. I had no words," Wamura wrote of the 1933 tsunami in his book about Fudai, "A 40-Year Fight Against Poverty."

He vowed it would never happen again.

In 1967, the town erected a 15.5-meter seawall to shield homes behind the fishing port. But Wamura wasn't finished. He had a bigger project in mind for the cove up the road, where most of the community was located. That area needed a floodgate with panels that could be lifted to allow the Fudai River to empty into the cove and lowered to block tsunami.

He insisted the structure be as tall as the seawall.

The village council initially balked.

"They weren't necessarily against the idea of floodgates, just the size," said Yuzo Mifune, head of Fudai's resident services and an unofficial floodgate historian. "But Wamura somehow persuaded them that this was the only way to protect lives."

Construction began in 1972 despite lingering concerns about its size as well as bitterness among landowners forced to sell land to the government.

Even current Mayor Fukawatari, who at the time helped oversee construction, had his doubts.

"I did wonder whether we needed something this big."

The concrete structure was completed in 1984. It spanned 205 meters from end to end. The total bill of ¥3.56 billion was split between the prefectural government and the central government.

On March 11, after the 9.0 earthquake hit, workers remotely closed the floodgate's four main panels. Smaller panels on the sides jammed, and a firefighter had to rush down to shut them by hand.

The tsunami battered the white beach in the cove, leaving behind debris and fallen trees. But behind the floodgate, the village is virtually untouched.

Fudai Elementary School sits no more than a few minutes' walk inland. It looks the same as it did on March 10. A group of boys recently ran laps

around a baseball field that was clear of the junk piled up in other coastal neighborhoods.

Their coach, Sachio Kamimukai, 36, was born and raised in Fudai. He said he never thought much about the floodgate until the tsunami.

"It was just always something that was there," he said. "But I'm very thankful now."

Fudai's biggest casualty was its exposed port, where the tsunami destroyed boats, equipment and warehouses.

One resident remains missing. He made the unlucky decision to check on his boat after the earthquake.

Wamura left office three years after the floodgate was completed. He died in 1997 at age 88. Since the tsunami, residents have been visiting his grave to pay respects.

At his retirement, Wamura stood before village employees to bid farewell: "Even if you encounter opposition, have conviction and finish what you start. In the end, people will understand."

**AP**, May 18, 2011

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\* The Japan Times:

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