

# Japan: Tohoku, the North-East, Has Been Rent Asunder for Future Generations

Monday 11 March 2013, by [PULVERS Roger](#) (Date first published: 11 March 2013).

One part of that region of northeastern Honshu comprises districts not directly affected by that day's Great East Japan Earthquake or the huge tsunami it triggered. A second is the coastal areas that were inundated or destroyed. The third is the towns and villages in Fukushima Prefecture affected by radioactive contamination from the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant.

Despite these demarcations, however, the entire Tohoku region and, in a sense, all Japan has been contaminated by radioactivity or the fear of contamination now and in the future.

I have just returned from a visit to the lovely seaport town of Miyako in Iwate Prefecture, which I first visited in 1970. Whenever I've been to the disaster zone in the past two years, the first thing I always seem to notice is the birds. This time I saw buzzards and hawks, white herons and crows ... and what looked like a family of swans in an empty lot, likely having come down from Siberia to overwinter in Japan.

Empty nests were all about, some in trees and others under the eaves of abandoned buildings. The birds seem oblivious to the calamity that changed the lives of all animals on the ground after March 11, 2011.

Miyako has incorporated several villages into its city limits, giving it a population of almost 60,000. One of those villages is Taro, a location hit particularly hard by the tsunami. Taro had built two 10-meter-high sea walls, completing them in 1958 and reinforcing them in 1966. But at Taro the tsunami reached 12 meters in height. It struck land there at 3:25 p.m., about 40 minutes after the earthquake. People there say that they put too much store in their sea walls, and that caused many to delay their escape. Two hundred people, nearly 5 percent of Taro's population, perished in the tsunami.

The walled embankments at Miyako were similarly useless. The frequently shown scene of black water flowing over an embankment was shot at Miyako.

Today, large sections of the city are a wasteland. Enormous piles of rubbish have been collected at the wharf and at the baseball stadium. The train line has been shut down, and I was told it is not to be reopened. Traveling by road is now the only way to and from this part of the once famously scenic Sanriku Coast.

But the thing that distinguishes this district of Tohoku from those contaminated by radioactivity is the heroic attempt to bring life back to normal.

I visited the Akamae Kindergarten. It was opened in 1948 and is still owned and operated by the Koseki family that set it up. The building is bright and new; and the children run around and jump about with screams of joy. They performed a play and recited Kenji Miyazawa's poem, "Strong in the Rain." And the teachers, each holding a flower, sang the NHK recovery song, "Flowers Will Bloom," whose lyrics I have translated.

Akamae Kindergarten in Miyako, Iwate, 2 March 2013. Next to the author is Mrs. Koseki, the founder of the kindergarten in 1948. The white-haired lady in the middle is Suemori Chieko, translator and publisher of children's books. Her main project now is to bring picture books to children in the disaster zone. The children can take these books home with them.

Later I went to the home of a couple with five children aged 8 and under. My wife and I brought up four children with a 6-year span in age ... but five! The home was tiny, and yet the children read picture books with their mother and felt the love coming from her and the entire community. As the lyrics of "Flowers Will Bloom" go: "Flowers will bloom ... for you who are yet to be born."

Contrast this with the situation in the contaminated zones. Rather than tell you of my experiences there, I will turn to biologist Timothy Mousseau, who, together with colleague Anders Moller, published data online last month on "The Effects of Low-dose Radiation." Mousseau and Moller have been visiting Chernobyl for more than two decades, as well as spending much time in Fukushima since March 2011.

"Radiation is everywhere, but it cannot be seen, smelt or felt," they write. But in the affected zones, the visitor notices "gnarly distortions of tree growth and numerous abnormalities in insects, birds and other animals. These are caused by genetic mutations induced by exposure to the radiation."

The two biologists assert that there has been "a suppression of information on Chernobyl and Fukushima by governments and government agencies in countries as diverse as the Soviet Union, France and Japan."

As for Japan, they note, "nowhere else than in the nuclear industry are scientists so partial with respect to research questions regarding public health or ecological effects of low-dose radiation." They go on, in their online study, to compare nuclear scientists in Japan with medical doctors employed by the tobacco industry in the 1950s.

Recently, the World Health Organisation has claimed that the effects on health of radiation from the Fukushima accident are not significant. But the study by Mousseau and Moller puts these claims into a clear perspective. A human generation is of the order of 30 years; so studies, even of the effects of the Chernobyl disaster, are essentially still in the first generation.

"We may only be seeing the first stage of the negative consequences," they write. "The next accident may expose as many as 30 million people to radioactive contamination. ... Birds, rodents and insects (near Chernobyl) are now in their 25<sup>th</sup> or greater generation (and) the negative effects of low-dose radiation from Chernobyl documented for these organisms are much worse than what is reported for humans."

When I read these findings, I cannot forget the radiant faces of the children of Akamae Kindergarten or the keen glare in the eyes of the little children listening to their mother read them stories. The people of Miyako have suffered unthinkable loss and hardship since the day two years ago that changed their lives and the lives of everyone in Japan. But at least they can embrace the hope that "flowers will bloom ... for you who are yet to be born."

The people who made their livelihoods in the contaminated regions of Tohoku, however, have no hope of return. They were abducted by a government and an energy industry that deceived them and continue to deceive them.

The very fact that the present government of Japan, under the leadership of Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, is intent on reconstituting the nuclear power industry is not only an insult to those victims of

radioactive contamination in Fukushima Prefecture, but an attack of monumental proportions on all people living in this country.

Mr. Abe, you say that you wish for a “strong Japan.” But the same strong arm that purports to defend the country is the one that will crush it and divest its inhabitants of all hope.

Not all enemies come from the outside. A nuclearized Japan is the greatest terror facing the people of this country. If this terror persists, then the only flowers that will bloom will be those on the graves of children living now and in generations to come.

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