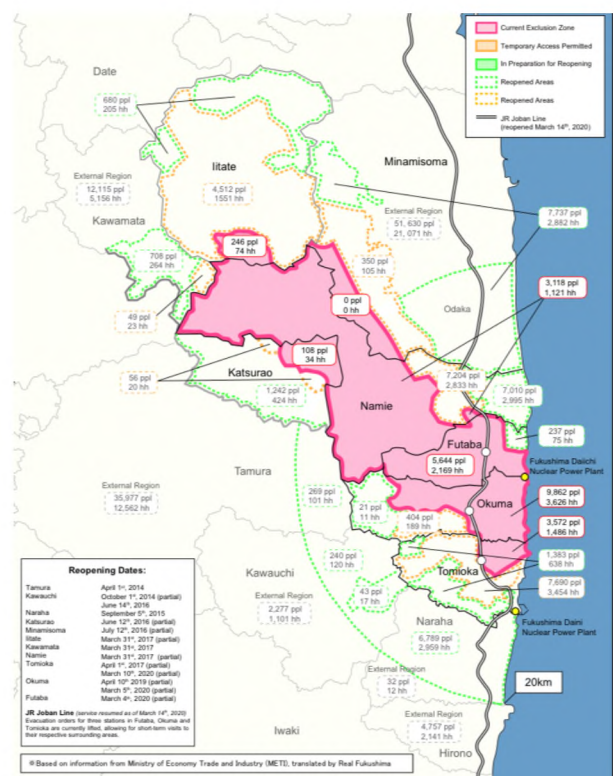
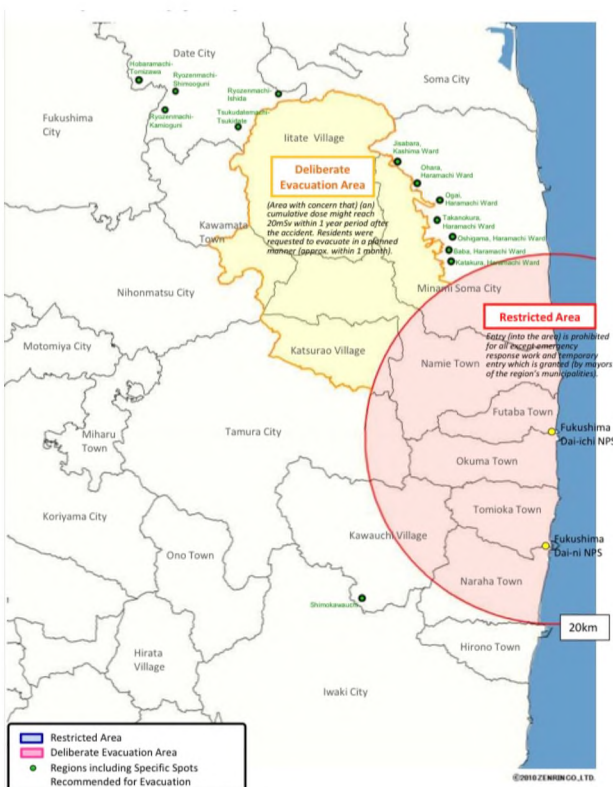




Hisanohama was among the hardest hit areas of Iwaki, suffering a series of fires as a result of damage after the tsunami. (Photo taken by Fukushima Pref Fire and Disaster Prevention Team, Miraikan #262)

At 2:46pm on the 11th of March, 2011, the largest earthquake in Japan's recorded history struck off the coast of Miyagi prefecture. The earthquake and the ensuing tsunami would drastically affect the lives of millions - particularly those residing along Tohoku region's eastern coastline. To make matters worse, the following day would see the meltdown of TEPCO's Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, stoking fear in the hearts of those watching, and permanently affecting the reputation of Fukushima prefecture, both in Japan and abroad.

The events of March 11th and the ensuing days would come to be known as the "March 2011 Triple Disaster".



Maps of the Exclusion Zone as of September 2011 (left) and March 2020 (right). Originally created by the Ministry of the Economy Trade and Industry (METI), translated by Real Fukushima.



# The Aftermath

At least 468 Iwaki residents lost their lives due to the disaster, while tens of thousands of others lost their homes. This figure is just a small portion of the total casualties of 3.11. As of 2020 there were nearly 16,000 people reported to have perished in the Great East Japan Earthquake, and almost 2600 still missing. Statistics which included disaster-related deaths from suicide and illness put this number closer to 20,000. In Iwaki, over 60,000 houses were partially or totally destroyed, and the full extent of the damage is still being recorded to this date.



The aftermath of the fires in Hisanohama as seen from the ground. (Photo taken by Hiroko Ishikawa, Miraikan, 249)

Regardless of the statistics used, it's impossible to convey the true extent of the suffering, and loss of lives and livelihoods using simple numbers. In the initial aftermath of the disaster, food, water, and petrol was cut off in Iwaki. This was further hindered by reluctance of truck drivers to enter the area, for fear of radiation. Facing an increasingly critical situation, on the 20th of March, the then-mayor Watanabe Takao would campaign to the minister of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries, allowing the city to receive 50,000 meals per day from the following day onward. Although cleanup efforts and rigorous metering would reveal levels of radiation no higher than the average city, concerns of radiation would quash local industry in the years following. Today, radiation levels are checked among all foods produced in Fukushima, which are held to some of the strictest regulations in the world.

In the ten years since the triple disaster, Iwaki has seen several drastic changes. For a time, the city was the last open township before the southern border of the exclusion zone. Until March 2020, Iwaki found itself on the departure boards of major stations in Tokyo, marking the last stop of the Hitachi Express, which until 2011 had run as far as Sendai, capital of the northern Miyagi prefecture.

Iwaki has become a settlement for many of those forced out of their homes and past lives in the areas deemed unsafe to return to. Solar-powered monitors displaying radiation levels can now be found throughout the city's parks and schools. Many areas that were once densely residential are now but coastal flatlands. Though the ways in which Iwaki has changed are marked and many, the city's residents are dedicatedly pursuing its revitalisation, while preserving the memories and lessons learned from the disaster for future generations.



The Self Defense Force refilling gas supplies at Takaku Elementary School (Photo taken by SDF, Miraikan #2620)



Tsunami debris in Usuiso district (Photo by Sadao Ono, Miraikan #664)



Although they have suffered unthinkable tragedy in wake of the triple disaster, the people of Tohoku have always been known for their resilience. Iwaki is no exception to this, having built upon the anti-tsunami seawall infrastructure developed after the disaster to create the Iwaki Nanahama Kaido - a cycling route which spans the city's 53km coastline. Much of this route is lined with an "anti-disaster green space" inundation areas, which consist of trees, parks, and forested areas - creating community hubs which use nature itself to protect against the elements.

Near the midway point of the route stands Aeon Mall Iwaki-Onahama - an obelisk of a shopping centre opened in 2018, that doubles as one of Iwaki's largest, and perhaps most comprehensive evacuation points - the first floor



Aeon Mall Iwaki-Onahama, a shopping centre designed to double as a short-term shelter facility in case of disaster

parking designed to allow waves to wash through, whereas the upper floors are equipped with their own power generator and emergency water supply.



53km of Iwaki's shoreline now serves as an innovative cycling route, making use of local roads and anti-tsunami infrastructure

Toward the northern stretch of the seawall is Yotsukura Port Roadside Station. Being one of the hardest hit areas in Iwaki, Yotsukura's Roadside Station suffered extreme damage during the tsunami. In August 2012, it would be rebuilt as larger, two-storey facility, and today serves as a vibrant community hub, where one can find fresh local foods. These are just some of the many other projects toward local revitalisation that people within the community are working toward. Further in prefecture, the land rendered unsuitable for long-term habitation has now been converted into solar farms; the goal is to have Fukushima prefecture powered by 100% renewable energy by 2040. Whether in Iwaki, or elsewhere, Fukushima keeps moving forward.



Ships were washed ashore in Onahama Port, near the current site of Aeon Mall (Photo by Kunio Koiso, Miraikan #1604)

While overcoming disaster can bring people together on a personal level, Iwaki has also seen its bonds strengthened on an inter-municipal, and international scale. In wake of the disaster, Iwaki City Created the "2011 Earthquake and Tsunami Relief Fund", which raised over 1.46 billion yen in more than 5000 donations from all over the world.



Taiko drumming outside of the newly rebuilt Yotsukura Roadside Station



Yotsukura Port was another of Iwaki's hardest hit areas (Photo originally published in the Iwaki Journal, Miraikan #480)



# Forging Relations

On May 19th, 2014, delegates from Iwaki went to the Hawaiian city of Kaua'i to witness the unveiling of a new public installation - a buoy from Onahama Bay. The buoy had travelled roughly 10,000km over the span of 22 months, before it was eventually discovered by a U.S. navy ship off the coast Kaua'i on January 18th, 2013. More impressive than the distance, is the fact that Kaua'i and Iwaki became friendship cities in 2011. Today, the buoy is displayed in Port Allen as a symbol of respect between the two cities, and as a tribute to its serendipitous journey.



The buoy originating in Onahama is now displayed in Port Allen, near its site of discovery

Within domestic borders, several townships that are now within the exclusion zone have found new home in Iwaki. The ward office of Futaba, the township wherein Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station is located, can now be found in Iwaki's south end of Nakoso district. Not far from there are the relocated Futaba North and South Elementary Schools - a tiny outpost, where sometimes students will mingle with those of the neighbouring Nishiki Elementary. During the winter season, Iwaki's downtown is illuminated by the Hikari Sakura Festival - wherein the rows of trees in the city's main street are lit up to resemble cherry blossoms. This is to pay tribute to Tomioka's Yonomori district - an area famed for its cherry blossoms, which until March 2020 had been rendered inaccessible by evacuation order. At the time of writing, Spring is in sight, and the cherry blossom illuminations are once again shining in commemoration of the ten-year anniversary, just as the real blossoms are beginning to bloom as well.



The Hikari Sakura Matsuri held in downtown Iwaki in tribute to Yonomori



Yonomori's famed cherry blossoms, reopened as of spring 2020 (Photo courtesy of the township of Tomioka)



Braving the rain, a crowd welcomes one of the first trains into the newly-reopened Yonomori Station. Full service of the Joban Line was resumed on March 14th, 2020.



For a time, Iwaki would attract train enthusiasts for running old models of the Super Hitachi for local service as far as the exclusion zone, where it would then connect to a shuttle bus.