

# Story From Japan: Lost And Found In Disaster Tourism

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**Abstract.** Due to unexpected level of disaster of Japan tsunami in 2011 generated massive and unprecedented devastation in the greater Tohoku region covering Iwate, Miyagi, and Fukushima prefectures. There were various assistant projects implemented by public and private initiatives to recover affected communities after disaster, including reconstruction projects, volunteer programs and local tourism development. For a decade after the Japan tsunami disaster, there are several movements and activities occurring in Ishinomaki city, one of the worst-hit areas. It reflects a context of social development from a content of losing in disaster to reborn the city, which generates strong community bonding and development. This paper is based on qualitative research aiming to explore and express through a narrative approach, telling a story of 'lost and found' through disaster tourism for local revitalization after disaster in such area. It also aims to provide a showcasing of social engagement in disaster tourism development, which can be learned and adapted in other regions in the future.

**Keywords:** Disaster tourism, Japan, Social engagement

## 1 Introduction

Due to an unexpected level of disaster of Japan tsunami disaster in 2011, it generated massive and unprecedented devastated in the greater Tohoku region covering Iwate, Miyagi, and Fukushima prefectures. There were various assistant projects implemented by both public and private initiatives, aiming to recover effected communities after disaster including reconstruction projects, volunteer programs and local tourism development. According to decade of recovery and rebuilding with various plans, programs and projects supported by different organizations both public and private sectors, many communities that effected by tsunami disaster reconstructed their towns and rehabilitated their livelihood progressively. There is concerning on resilience for a long-term disaster preparedness and management which includes education and knowledge building for people for their self-safety and increasing coping capacity. Moreover, various projects were also emphasized on awareness raising and understand history of such places, generating social development, and also engaging people both locals and outsiders in rehabilitation through social engagement.

Volunteer programs implemented by different Japanese universities nation-wide and non-profit organizations were one of major mechanism for community recovery and rehabilitation after Tsunami disaster [1], later became volunteer tourism programs offered for both students and non-academic groups for sight-visiting at devastated area and involve in organized volunteer activities, but not exactly tourism-oriented as socio-economic re-development for tsunami effected communities.

There was an initial idea of local stakeholders willing to transform volunteer tourism into disaster tourism to extent a long-term tourism development in the area which can support community rehabilitation and revitalization after disaster. This paper provides narrative case study based on a qualitative research project focusing on Ishinomaki city, one of the worst tsunami-hit areas, Miyagi prefecture. It aims to provide an understanding how disaster tourism developed in the area with social engagement practice which can be learned and adapted in other areas in future.

## **2 Literature Review**

Considering disaster tourism occurs in the destination of devastated grounds, memorials and museums commemorate victims and disaster-affected areas come into existence. Those places visited in consecutive years are classified as so-called thanatourism or dark tourism [2]. Existing such places of natural disaster tourism destinations included Hurricane Kartirna in Louisianne USA; Tornadoes in Joblin, Missouri, USA; Great Earthquake in Kobe, Japan, Andaman Tsunami in Thailand. And following Great Earthquake and Tsunami, Japan. Disaster tourism is a form of tourism that is not planned and is different from cultural and sustainable tourism. Natural disaster tourism is developed in places that were not originally intended to become tourism sites [3], [4]

Disaster destinations became a new area for tourists interested in experiencing and learning about areas of destruction and human trauma. Places to visit and people to meet are directly related to extreme natural events and their consequences, both physical and social behavior aspects. This requires ethics, morals, and concerns on sensitive issues to plan, manage, and mitigate negative impacts that may generate from disaster tourism by hosts and tourists. This requires social engagement from various stakeholders to design and develop appropriate disaster tourism to support local destinations for post-disaster re-development. Possible stakeholders to participate include local authorities, local communities, and related tourism organizations, which can be both private and non-profit sectors. Pongponrat [1] mentioned that social engagement involves major stakeholder groups through decision-making, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, and benefit sharing.

To understand why people engage in tourism disaster development, there are various reasons for engagement. These include social capital such as networks; knowledge; trusts, respects; recognition; socio-economic benefits; leadership, availability and accessibility [7]. The core idea of social capital is that social networks have values as interactions and connections that develop shared norms and trust, fostering cooperation to achieve joint ends [7]. Therefore, social engagement with collective action and social learning process is addressed as a fundamental approach that promotes local rehabilitation towards increasing individual and community design, management, and control to improve the quality of community life.

### **3 Methodology**

This paper is based on qualitative research, focusing on fieldwork with locals to understand disaster tourism development in Ishinomaki city. This included volunteer centers, educational institutions, government agencies, private sectors, and NPOs. Several meetings were set up with stakeholders to receive information on how Ishinomaki city was re-developed through disaster tourism. It aims to understand the development of natural tourism disasters in Ishinomaki city. Field observation around the target area was implemented to understand the area's physical and social conditions post-disaster. A narrative approach with content analysis was employed to analyze community conditions and social engagement in disaster tourism to serve community rehabilitation.

### **4 Findings**

The Great East-Japan Earthquake, with a magnitude of 9.0 generated a massive and devastating tsunami that descended upon the Tohoku region on March 11, 2011. This led to a decline in local economic development. They were facing the difficulties of living without a job and income compared to their lives before. Therefore, regional tourism development became an important mechanism to reboot the local economy, meanwhile is expected to be a social driver for local people through moral support and experience sharing. This idea of disaster tourism development became a major project for community rehabilitation, emphasizing a social engagement approach.

Compared with Sendai, a prominent city of the Tohoku region, tourism in Ishinomaki and surrounding areas was not very well-known for international tourists but more for domestic tourists, which is still considered a small scale. This area focuses on fishery and food processing manufacturing as primary income-generating sources with few tourist attractions. However, one of the main tourist attractions in Ishinomaki is 'Ishinomori Manga Museum' or the so-called 'Ishinomaki Mangattan Museum,' which opened in 2001, ten years before the tsunami disaster. After the tsunami, this museum played an essential role in supporting the community for relief and recovery, such as providing an evacuation shelter for tsunami victims, later becoming a central function for participatory community projects, producing various creative works for rehabilitation.

Typically, disaster tour program starts from JR Ishinomaki station, then walks around Ishinomaki city to observe tsunami traces and rebuilding projects. Visitors came as a group and were accompanied by a local tour guide from the tour program organizer. Many local tour guides worked as volunteers to tell the story of their hometown and tsunami disaster while showing tsunami-affected places. The tour programs can be from 1.5 hours to half a day.

A walking map allows visitors to follow routes with an interpretation of each stop. The tour included Ishinomaki Community and Information Center (ICIC), a facility to educate visitors about the disaster and the recovery through exhibitions. It is an important place that attracts foreign visitors. The Director of the Center can also provide an introduction and tour in English since he came from England and has lived in Ishinomaki for decades. The Director also shares his story and tsunami experiences with visitors, generating social learning environments. The next place to visit is Ishinomaki NEWSee, a small museum run by a local newspaper company. During the disaster, they made newspapers written by their own hands to share information with

locals. The original copies of the newspapers are exhibited in the museum, and visitors will also have a chance to listen to their stories.

Hiyoriyama Park, a hillside area, is one of the most exciting places to visit, where visitors can overlook Ishinoamki town, to see empty land destroyed by tsunami and reconstruction projects. This hill was also where tsunami victims evacuated from their houses and stayed during disaster emergencies. The tour program in Ishinomaki also takes visitors to Minamihama district, where Minamihama 3.11 Memorial Hall is located in the middle of this vast empty area. Inside the Memorial Hall is a diorama of the site, showing the location on pre-tsunami while displays present various artifacts salvaged from the post-disaster. Mostly, information is presented in the Japanese language only.

There is a unique relic from the days immediately after the tsunami disaster, a locally famous large sign in the Japanese language that means 'Gamboro! Ishinomaki' (Never Ever Give Up, Ishinomaki), which was made by locals shortly after the tsunami disaster to boost up moral support for locals, later it was taken on board by the community, and soon people started laying flowers by the sign which became a spot for photo taking for visitors. There are also panels presenting photos of this area's aftermath of the tsunami disaster with information in the Japanese language. Kadonowaki Elementary School, one of the ruin sites nearby, is also an official national memorial. Between two new apartment blocks, an old cemetery was damaged by the disaster but remains. Visitors can also observe massive seawalls along roadsides. Ishinomaki Genki Ichiba, a community market also a place to visit where visitors can buy souvenirs and local products. The storytelling program is a potent social learning activity in natural disaster tourism. Volunteer guides will share their disaster memories with visitors while guiding visitors to natural disaster sites. Many were tsunami victims who lost their families, friends and relatives. This storytelling program was supported by 'United Earth', a social action collective organized in Kobe city where there was the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake in 1995. Besides visiting natural disaster sites in Ishinomaki town, a half or one-day tour program will take visitors to an area nearby by bus so-called 'bus tour'. Mainly, they visit Minamisanriku area, including Minamisanriku community reconstruction market, the ruins sites such as Announcement Tower, where there is a story of Miki Endo, a brave local girl who helped to save people in Minamisanriku area, and the Ruins of Okawa Elementary School where the tsunami profoundly damaged the building, and it preserved as a monument.

Various private tour companies, non-profit organizations, and even individual tour guides offer natural disaster tourism programs for visitors. However, these programs are still limited to small groups of visitors whose mainly from other prefectures within Japan. There is still a limited number of foreign visitors to take the tour program since it is a specific type of tourism. The language barrier and distance away from major tourist destinations in Japan are also considered for further development.

## **5 Discussion**

Based on the research, disaster tourism development in Ishinomaki was a result of local initiatives through a social engagement approach. There were various forms of local involvement in designing and formulating five-year town and city plans which included zoning, reconstructions, and local tourism development, focusing on natural disaster tourism as a theme. This plan was developed by brainstorming, meetings, and group discussions among local

stakeholders, including government authorities, private sectors, non-profit organizations, and local people, which were supported by a series of community participation in which people were involved in different aspects from decision-making, implementation, to monitoring and evaluation [1]. Social engagement aimed to design appropriate projects such as storytelling programs, roles and responsibilities identification such as volunteer tour guides, staff at the information center, souvenirs and local products service, accommodation services, and transportation services. These tourism services were identified as possibilities to include in the tour program, meanwhile ensuring that locals would receive benefits from the program, both income-generating and moral support. These practices were supported by the concept of local involvement with a clear direction [8] to implement in consensus, which requires participation from different stakeholders in the community to exchange information, knowledge and experiences, and resources [8], [9] for community rehabilitation through disaster tsunami development. Social capital can be a mechanism to be involved with community members in a participatory community project. Social capital, which was identified in this case, significantly played a huge role in social engagement for disaster tourism development. Leaders and members of the community committee obviously presented a leadership style [8] and acted as the main body of the involvement process to provide a channel for people involved in brainstorming and discussion about the rehabilitation plan. This also occurred as a 'social organization' with trust, norms and networks being facilitated by coordinated action among the community [10]. This paper shows the collective action of network-engaging among local stakeholders, including local authorities, the private sector, volunteer groups, non-profit organizations, and local people, presenting significant local initiatives for their community rehabilitation.

## 6 Conclusions

This paper provided narrating on social engagement in disaster tourism development for community rehabilitation after the tsunami disaster in the year 2011. The case study of Ishinomaki city showed that community members from different sectors were involved in the participatory process for such tourism program designing and implementation. Findings addressed that social engagement is one of the mechanisms that have been applied in various development stages, which was responding to people's problems and needs and thus improving the quality of life for themselves and their community after the tsunami disaster once the concept was applied into real practice with social capital as a mechanism to increase involvement while providing social learning for visitors and enhancing the capability of disaster tourism development in the long term such as marketing, interpretation, and information in various languages, impacts assessment, and sustainability.

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