

It's Beautiful Here at Fukushima  
July 2012

By Miki Saito

Thu, Sep 22, 2011 at 11:25 PM

Dear Ms. Miki Saito,

Thank you for all of your help. It is unfortunate to hear that we will not be able to have you with us for our next project, but as our goal is to continue to spread awareness, we intend to have many more projects and events in the future. Hopefully, we will be able to work together on another such project soon.

As a resident of one of the affected communities, my perspective may be a bit subjective, but I would like to provide a brief update on what the situation [in Fukushima] is like. Radioactive contamination is something that cannot be smelled or seen. In a lot of ways, it is similar to the way we think about ghosts.

There are some people who believe in and are frightened by ghosts while there are others who refuse to accept their existence and go on with their lives without any concern for them what so ever. In a similar way, in Fukushima prefecture, there are two groups of people – the “believers” of the threat who are frightened, and the “non-believers” who refuse to be frightened. Although we are all facing the same threat, there is a reason why such a divided response has emerged. It is because the concept of radiation contamination directly affects the way we have lived in the past, and our ability to survive into the future.

Fukushima prefecture is an agricultural community. Our main export is the food we have grown. If we believe that this region is contaminated by unacceptable levels of radiation, we will never be able to sell or export what we have worked so hard to grow. Our jobs, and along with it, our way of life, will be destroyed. We will have to abandon the very land that our ancestors have worked so hard to protect and maintain for generations. It is not an option or choice that anyone in this prefecture can consider lightly. As a result, even in Itachi city where I work, there have emerged protest groups that have called for the widespread practice of “consuming ourselves the food that Fukushima has grown.” As the Japanese government has measured the radiation levels in our food, and has declared that the food grown is safe to eat, we feel compelled to showcase the food’s safety by consuming the food ourselves. However, this move in itself is not without problems. The local food we buy to showcase the food’s safety is also consumed by our children every single day. This has sparked outrage among local residents who claim that children are much more sensitive and susceptible to radiation, and that the move towards “consuming the food that we grow” is directly harming our children. As this has proved to be too much for some families, many have chosen to move away from Fukushima, and raise their family in a different prefecture. I have received reports that have shown that up to 10% of all public school students (elementary school, middle school, high school) have recently moved away from Fukushima. I personally believe that the real number is likely higher. Even my wife and child have moved to the neighboring town of Yonezawa city (different prefecture). In reality, even if there are local residents who want to move, there are many who cannot move because they are unable to leave their jobs. As a result, many families who would otherwise leave the prefecture, now simply stay completely indoors. Other families

have chosen to divide up the family, with some family members leaving the prefecture, and others still staying to continue their job. As radioactive cesium's half-life is 30 years, if decontamination efforts do not make more progress, entire families will remain divided, and will eventually break down. One of my friends mentioned to me the other day that the most painful thing he has to bear listening to every single day is his daughter telling him over the phone that she looks forward to seeing him again that night, not in person, but in her dreams.

Seeing as how Fukushima residents themselves are this concerned about the radiation, it is no wonder that people outside of Fukushima are keeping away from Fukushima grown foods and avoiding any tourism there. There is a park near my house where people come from all over Japan to pick fruits, but this year, the park is experiencing only 10% of the traffic that they normally have. So even though the Japanese Government is saying that the radiation levels are too low to affect human health and that the food grown in Fukushima is safe to eat, almost no one is buying our foods. It's not just the individual consumers as well – entire stores and regions are beginning to reject anything that is produced or processed in Fukushima.

(<http://www.sponichi.co.jp/society/news/2011/09/20/kiji/K20110920001659610.html>)

I have read news that as people are starting to believe that Fukushima=Radiation, people based outside of Fukushima are treating any resident(s) who has moved outside of Fukushima as though they are some kind of infectious animal.

We have done nothing wrong. We have even allowed facilities that generate electricity for the people living in Tokyo far away to be situated and operated on our soil. Yet, this is the situation that we are forced to face. As of now, the Japanese government only provides compensation for people who are or who have been living within 20km of the nuclear power plant.

I apologize that this response has become so long, but I must add one final thing, which also happens to be the biggest source of my suffering now. The [radiation issue] has stripped all Fukushima people of their dignity. Just the very act of telling someone that you are from Fukushima will make them treat you differently, as though you're dirty, or tainted, or infected. It's enough to make us feel embarrassed and ashamed of where we are from. The people of Fukushima have lived beautiful lives in harmony with nature – our children have played in our rivers, climbed our pristine mountains, feasted on our plentiful fruits, and enjoyed every moment of their lives here. Without any warning, this way of life that we have come to love and expect was taken from us. And in its place, we now face a lifestyle where we are filled with fear, and are told by "experts" that our children, and their children will have deformities and birth defects for up to 4 generations. To this day, I still cannot fully comprehend or even begin to reconcile this gap. This situation has continued for over 6 months, and I can tell you that there has not been a single day in that time where my family has felt that things are improving.

In the end, my wife and I often talk about moving far, far away where we can leave this situation altogether. However, the reality is, I have a mortgage on my house to pay. I have children to raise. I just don't know what to do. It is as though I am walking through a dark tunnel with no light at the end. And I am feeling like this every single day.

The truth is the Japanese government will likely cover up the radiation problem caused by the nuclear power plant. They will continually assert that everything has been fixed, and that there is no longer any problem. They will state that radioactive concerns are not the reason why foods grown in Fukushima cannot be sold. They will delete any articles that discuss radioactive contamination on the Internet. And with all of this, I am afraid that the plight and sufferings of all the people living in Fukushima prefecture will be forgotten. People may know what happened to Fukushima prefecture as a region, but I fear that most people will never understand what happened to the individual people living inside Fukushima, and all the suffering that they had to go through.

My hope is that you will be able to pass this message along so that even one additional person can understand what has happened, and what continues to happen today.

Please contact me again if there is anything I can help with.

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Being in Japan at the time when the 3.11 Tsunami and Earthquake happened was a traumatizing experience for me. I cannot fully explain within a couple of pages what that experience was like. The damage is said to be as severe as when we lost WWII. However, in these hard times, the amazing helpfulness and unity citizens showed after the incident was the most inspiring thing I have witnessed in my life, and I fully believe that unity was what led to Japan's speedy recovery. Although many cities have found their way to recovery, the one thing that still brings pain to everybody's heart is the unresolved issue of nuclear power, in light of the nuclear disaster at Fukushima. Nobody knows how to deal with it because no one knows exactly how a nuclear melt down impacts the people and the environment, and how the nuclear power plants themselves can be fixed to prevent future disasters. Various scientists and politicians all go back and forth debating the actual 'safety' of citizens, but no one believes in any of the official statements anymore as so many cover-ups and lies have since been revealed. People have witnessed dying trees, pink grasshoppers in their rice fields, contaminated waters and food, yet many of these testimonies have been rejected as real effects of the nuclear disaster. The fact that radiation is invisible and unknown, as mentioned in the letter, makes radiation seem look like "a ghost." Controversial debates go on and on. To find their own happiness and peace, many citizens have already moved on by caring less because they cannot take the long lasting pain of being involved anymore. The nuclear reactor still occasionally mysteriously smokes till this day and everybody is furious but very numb to the painful situation now. Being personally involved with people from Fukushima allowed me to stay connected to the situation on the ground, but staying connected has been the most emotionally difficult thing for me. I have received this letter from a schoolteacher in Fukushima back in 2011, and I promised him that his voice would be heard. It has taken about a year for me now to complete this piece, not only because it was emotionally hard to face, but also because creating art on this subject matter required a deep understanding of the affected people that still suffer. This is the most emotionally invested piece that I have ever made, and I can only hope that through this piece, people will realize that Fukushima is still there and still in pain.