

# 3.11 Tohoku disasters: 10 years on

## Peace Winds & recovery in the devastated region



Togura district, Minamisanriku

A field report,  
Minamisanriku,  
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March 11, 2021 marks the 10th anniversary of the earthquake and tsunami that devastated the Tohoku region of northeastern Japan, claiming more than 18,000 lives. Thanks to the concerns of the American public and the generosity of our supporters in the U.S., Peace Winds has been active in the region ever since, and a recent visit to Minamisanriku, one of the towns most affected by the disasters, revealed the level of recovery that has been achieved during the past decade.

This report provides an overview of that visit, outlining some of the rebuilding achievements in Minamisanriku and the role Peace Winds has played in helping the people there to recover, including programs to get the region's fishing industry back up and running. A main purpose of the visit was to conduct interviews with leaders and other members of the Minamisanriku community for use on the Peace Winds website.



The Shizugawa district of central Minamisanriku

## Redevelopment

Minamisanriku, a coastal town in Miyagi Prefecture, was wiped out by the 3.11 tsunami, with more than 800 residents losing their lives and thousands more left homeless. The town, which is made up of several coastal communities, has undergone extensive rebuilding, with civil engineering projects providing new, higher sea defenses and lower lying areas in the central Shizugawa district, where the town's administrative nerve center and residential and commercial zone once stood, being elevated by 10 meters. Today this zone is home to the Sun Sun Sanriku Shopping Village, a new wholesale market that serves as a mainstay of the fishing industry and a smattering of other businesses and eateries, but residential areas have largely been moved away from the seafront to higher ground. Today around two-thirds of the town's pre-disaster population of 17,378 has returned, and lives are slowly returning to normal. Peace Winds has been instrumental



Utatsu Port and the new sea defenses

in supporting a number of projects that are directly linked to that recovery.

## Fisheries recovery

Fisheries is a mainstay of coastal parts of the Tohoku region, and Minamisanriku is no exception. Peace Winds was instrumental in helping with the speedy recovery of the local fisheries industry in Minamisanriku, notably the recommencement of the "wakame" seaweed industry in the Utatsu district. Shinya Chiba, a former fisheries cooperative chief, explained that Utatsu was one of the

first places to acquire the requisite tools and facilities for the harvesting and processing of wakame and that this would have been difficult to achieve without the support of organizations such as Peace Winds.

A change in the marine environment since the disasters has meant some prized marine life caught pre-3.11, such as wild salmon, has become conspicuous by its almost total absence from the waters, presenting new challenges for the town's fishermen and fisheries operations. Wakame production, however, continues apace and we were able to visit one of the huts where the seaweed is processed, meeting with three female workers who chatted animatedly as they worked. It seemed like a fitting anecdote of how life is slowly starting to return to normal following years of difficulties in communities such as Utatsu.

## Community support

In an attempt to start restoring other infrastructure directly linked to residents' lifestyles, Peace Winds worked side-by-side with local residents to develop the NPO Viva! Minamisanriku, which operates a community center. This center was created to replace a human resources center for senior members of the town, which had been very active in the community but had sadly been destroyed by the 3.11 disasters. Viva! Minamisanriku is largely open-plan, but has a warm and welcoming feel and has become a place where residents gather for a chat and take part in a variety of activities. We were told that the original human resources center for senior residents will be reopening there in April 2021.



The Sun Sun Sanriku Shopping Village

## Around town

We were also given the chance to look around the Sun Sun Sanriku Shopping Village, a collection of 28 stores inside six buildings constructed from locally grown Japanese cedar. Designed by Kengo Kuma, who is best known as the architect behind the National Stadium for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, the shopping village has become a major draw for tourists, with visitor numbers apparently now exceeding those before the disasters.

Across the estuary, a newly constructed park commemorates the disasters, centering around the skeletal remains of the former disaster management center, where staff sacrificed their lives to warn residents of the tsunami and which has since become a symbol of the disasters.

Across the road from the park and standing right on the seafront is another building that survived the disasters — the Takano Kaikan, a wedding and event venue. Dozens of residents sheltered on the roof of this



The remains of the Disaster Management Center (right) and Takano Kaikan (left)

building and a blue plaque above the third floor indicates the height (16 meters) that the tsunami waves reached — just a few meters below the roof.

We also visited the new town offices, which are located inside an impressive building that falls within a newly developed zone high above the Sun Sun Sanriku shopping center that also includes a public hospital and housing complex. There we met town mayor, Jin Sato, who told his story of survival after the tsunami struck, sheltering on the roof of the old town hall with 43 other officials and residents, watching on in horror as waves came crashing. Mayor Sato was one of just 10 of those 43 residents who remained after the tsunami waves engulfed the building. In the blink of an eye, he said, the unprecedented tsunami waves had swallowed them up, wreaking havoc on an entire community, but in the immediate aftermath Peace Winds and various support groups reached out to offer support as the town battled to move forward, he says. "I still remember how reassuring they were ... saying 'We will do whatever we can to help.' "

## Concluding remarks

Minamisanriku's remarkable recovery was much in evidence during this visit and over the past decade Peace Winds has been instrumental in supporting a number of projects that are directly linked that revival. Along with the town's recovery local residents and organizations that Peace Wind has been supporting have started to find their feet, and Peace Winds has been gradually standing back from any direct involvement.

From interviews conducted with local residents and officials it is clear, however, that the contribution made by Peace Winds has not been forgotten. Likewise, Peace Winds is forever grateful to those people in the United States who have provided such generous support over the past decade. Peace Winds will continue to play a role in the Tohoku region and elsewhere around the globe through its many relief projects. We look forward to your continued support. (Robert Gilhooly)