Out of the Dark: The Challenges of Branding Post-Disaster Tourism Ten Years after the Great East Japan Earthquake

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Abstract

The act of visiting disaster sites by non-locals is often controversial, such as the promotion of so-called dark tourism or post-disaster tourism. After the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, Tsunami, and Nuclear Disaster, the affected communities in Northeast Japan encouraged travel to the disaster sites as a way to support the region financially and pass on lessons learned in the disaster for disaster mitigation. This paper discusses how the promotion of post-disaster tourism through novel brands such as “Bosai (disaster mitigation) Tourism” or “Hope Tourism,” conversely emphasizes the positive aspects of disaster-related tourism rather than the “dark” or negative aspects. Drawing on ethnographic field research, analyses of tour descriptions and contents on websites offered by national and prefectural disaster tourism, participant observation at disaster tours, and interviews with local community members and tour organizers, this paper discusses the framing as well as the potential benefits of disaster-related tourism for local recovery and disaster mitigation, while exploring the challenges and burdens this form of tourism may inflict on the local communities. We argue that, despite the ethical challenges dark tourism may generate, confronting tragedies through dark or post-disaster tourism encourages visitors to connect with uncomfortable pasts, potentially helping to prevent similar tragedies from recurring as a result.

Cite this article

Introduction

The afternoon of March 11, 2011 (henceforth referred to as 3.11) was a devastating time for coastal communities of the Tohoku region in Northeast Japan. At 2:46 pm, a magnitude 9 earthquake occurred off the coast of Miyagi Prefecture and triggered a tsunami that destroyed communities along the Tohoku coast and caused the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant accident. More than 20,000 people lost their lives in the disaster, and as of 2021, about 2500 people have never been found. Of the 350,000 displaced, more than 30,000 are still registered as official evacuees (Reconstruction Agency, 2021).

The Great East Japan Earthquake struck a region that was already experiencing steady depopulation and aging communities before the 3.11 disasters. This ongoing depopulation added to the challenges within the recovery and reconstruction process. Unlike urban areas that experience disasters, rural regions do not have many large companies or nearby cities which offer numerous employment opportunities that could support recovery. Moreover, the tsunami-inundated areas in Tohoku were declared tsunami hazard zones and residential reconstruction in these areas was prohibited (Araki, Hokugo & Masuda, 2016). The time it took to rebuild and resettle the destroyed towns on elevated land, the lack of job opportunities, and the uncertain future regarding the nuclear evacuation zones in Fukushima Prefecture accelerated the
depopulation of the Tohoku region (Matanle, 2013).[1] These difficulties supported the idea of raising the “non-resident population” (kōryu jinkō), a term that describes people who have connections to a region without living there. Tourism has been used for regional revitalization for decades as part of such programs (Ivy, 1995; Roberston, 1988).

Tourism is considered to not only financially aid the disaster-stricken regions, but also to contribute to disaster education (bōsai kyōiku) for individuals who visit those areas, participate in tours guided by survivors, and witness the recent exhibitions in and surrounding the disaster heritage sites (shinsai ikō). However, the promotion of disaster tourism remains a highly debated topic. As only ten years have passed since the 2011 disasters, this tragedy is still a part of contemporary memory. Some survivors, especially those who have lost relatives to the disasters, are opposed to promoting tourism in a region still suffering and relatively unknown for tourism before these disasters (Martini & Buda, 2019). The term “dark tourism” (dāku tsūrizumu) has been particularly criticized by locals for exploiting their losses or emphasizing the negative aspects of their region while overshadowing other facets of life in Tohoku (Sakaguchi, 2020). However, many citizen groups who use tourism to engage in disaster storytelling to convey the impact of the disasters conversely express concern over low numbers of visitors to the Tohoku region (Mirai Support, 2020; Tanaka et al, 2021).

In this paper, we discuss some of the merits and challenges that emerged with using post-disaster tourism as a revitalization and disaster education method after the Great East Japan Earthquake. Through analyses of respective websites, advertisements and programs, we explore how tourism programs, especially those supported by local and national governments, continue to turn away from the dark aspects of difficult pasts, such as wars or disaster, by highlighting the positive aspects that emerge from such tragedies. Based on ethnographic field research in the Tohoku region, participant observation in post-disaster tourism and qualitative interviews with local residents, disaster survivors, tour guides and disaster tourism program organizers conducted between 2017 and 2021[2], we also introduce some examples of tours provided in recovering towns which emphasize the necessity of inviting visitors to learn from contemporary tragedies while simultaneously revealing the ethical challenges present.
in dark and post-disaster tourism. We ultimately conclude that post-disaster tourism can be a powerful tool to provide disaster education and empower locals to share their experiences. Furthermore, lessons learned through visiting disaster-related sites must also address controversial aspects such as questions of responsibility, nuclear policies, sea walls, and failed evacuation practices. Through addressing these dark aspects in combination with the emotional experiences of actually visiting the sites and speaking to survivors, visitors may be the most influenced to learn and remember, preventing similar tragedies from recurring as a result.

**Dark Tourism and its negative connotations in Japan**

“Dark Tourism” implies non-locals being incentivised to visit areas associated with tragic deaths (i.e. accidental, violent, untimely, or self-inflicted deaths) and disasters (Suzuki, 2013). The term was originally introduced by Lennon and Foley (1996, p. 195) to describe the desire to visit places connected to tragedies for “remembrance, education and entertainment.” Seaton (1996, p. 240) examined Dark Tourism mainly as a category of tourism involving people who “travel to a location wholly, or partly motivated by the desire for actual or symbolic encounters with death.” Since the introduction of this term, many subcategories have emerged, such as war tourism, slum tourism, or grief tourism. Disaster tourism is considered another subcategory of dark tourism as it encompasses visiting sites in which catastrophic events have occurred, such as the sites of the 2011 Earthquake, Tsunami and Nuclear Disaster in Tohoku. Discussion regarding the origins of dark tourism and its subcategories is still ongoing (Seaton, 2018). Lennon and Foley (1996) originally coined the term as a modern phenomenon, whereas more recent research (Edmondson, 2018; Lennon & Weber, 2017; Walchester 2018) indicates examples of visiting sites of historical tragedies such as the Colosseum in Rome, or sites for the purpose of history and heritage tourism, such as visits to Holocaust memorials in Europe. Although some research focused on visitors’ “fascination with suffering,” raising many ethical questions, dark tourism may also be used to describe the “desire to pay homage to victims of past atrocities” (Nhlabathi & Maharaj, 2019, p. 2428). Therefore, to categorize tourism as dark tourism,
the motivation for the visit may not be as relevant as the act of visiting sites connected to suffering. Scholars continue to discuss the ethics of dark tourism, particularly the motivations behind visits to the sites where tragedies took place. Schaller (2007) criticizes the marketization of places connected to “bad deaths” to “meet the voyeuristic needs of tourists” and the “entertainment” value potentially being sought. While pointing to its educational potential, Cochrane (2015, p.51) discusses how war tourism in Europe may be perceived as cheapening and airbrushing traumatic experiences of conflict “into an anodyne form that misrepresents the actual lived experience of conflict,” such as by selling merchandise such as postcards or keychains, to meet tourist needs. Disaster Tourism has likewise been described as featuring such voyeuristic and exploitative aspects in some cases. Godbey (2006, p.273) uses the example of the 1889 Johnstown Flood to show how disaster tourists reframed the event in a “rhetoric of leisure,” such as by collecting souvenirs, pictures of the aftermath, or taking photos of the disaster site. Furthermore, in the direct aftermath of disasters, visitors, even as volunteers, may instead hinder rather than help the recovery process in the affected communities through delaying efforts or acting in disrespectful ways (Woman on the road Blog post, 2018). Cochrane (2015, p. 53) describes that “[t]ourism, and the broader economic and political infrastructure in which it is embedded, is needed in such [disaster-affected] places, but tourism inevitably simplifies the complexities of conflict while often keeping old wounds open and even exacerbating them.”

Despite such concerns related to dark tourism, tourism and so-called “negative” heritage preservation were still seen as a potential means for financial support and recovery of the Tohoku region and embraced as such by many people. For example, Gasparri and Martini (2018) trace how the TV morning series Amachan, a drama depicting a young woman who moves to Tohoku to become a diver before the 2011 disasters, increased tourism to towns from the disaster-stricken region featured in the series. The show was produced by the national broadcaster NHK to support the disaster-stricken region in Sanriku, the setting of the series. The story focuses on a young ama\textsuperscript{4} diver and culminates with the devastating tsunami in 2011. After the show was aired, the economic revenue generated for the region accumulated to 3.3 billion yen.
The Sanriku Tetsudo, a local railway company featured in the series, introduced special tours in which visitors could travel around the towns depicted in the show and learn about these towns before and after the tsunami. Gasparri and Martini (2018) refer to unpublished research by Kitamura to state that through the positive images of the region depicted in *Amachan*, the subsequent tourism of the region led to the accumulation of resources for the rebuilding of hometowns and an increase in locals’ satisfaction with the image of their hometowns.

The positive effects of post-disaster tourism are also stressed by Kato (2018; 2021), who argues that the development of tourism, such as disaster-related tours guided by survivors, supports communities beyond monetary gain. This development enables local people to maintain their connections to their hometowns and consequently increases their resilience towards the impacts of the disaster through empowering activities. Kato (2018) writes:

> Expressions of understanding, appreciation, empathy and compassion were important elements of recovery that supported the building and restoration of resilience, providing a foundation for further reconstruction and development. It is argued that these tourism activities provide an important foundation for the area’s sustainable reconstruction and development, as it recognized identities, local history, wisdom, skills and knowledge that have allowed living with a particular kind of environment which has evolved over a long period of time (p.63).

As Kato (2018) and Kitamura (2018) note, the development of tourism supports the affected communities both economically and psychologically. They argue that this contribution becomes especially important during long-term recovery when media coverage dwindles, and survivors may fear to become forgotten.

However, the promotion of visiting disaster sites in the Tohoku region simultaneously faces criticism while benefitting from these positive effects. In the case of post-disaster tourism in Tohoku, some researchers criticize the effects that preservation of disaster heritage and the promotion of related tourism may have on the regions. Littlejohn (2020) warns that the heritage boom may result in a ‘museumification’ of Tohoku, in
reference to the growing number of designated disaster remains, as well as the ‘experientialization’ of showcasing declining arts and industries for tourists. This tourism, he cautions, may support the region in the short-term, but does not prevent the region’s steady depopulation and declining industry, and conversely generates an obsolete image of the region.

Sakaguchi (2021) further stresses that preservation decisions for disaster heritage were strongly influenced by people and organizations from outside the local communities, especially universities. She points to another debate regarding so-called negative heritage preservation in Tohoku, which concerns the influence of passing on traumatic collective memories of place identity for visitors and outsiders (Sakaguchi, 2021). This issue has been discussed regarding other places connected to tragic pasts as well (see also Dehoorne & Jolliffe, 2013; Bird, 2013; White, 2013; Carr, 2017; Lennon & Weber, 2017). Sakaguchi expresses the need to acknowledge local voices which speak against showcasing the region’s negative experiences. In a research paper on disaster heritage in Otsuchi Town, she investigates the reasons residents opposed the promotion of disaster tourism in their municipality, particularly the preservation of Otsuchi Townhall, where the mayor and 27 city employees lost their lives. She summarizes (2021):

The men [who opposed the preservation] harbored a strong resentment against the fact that a negative image of Otsuchi was disseminated in juxtaposition with the issue of whether disaster remains should be preserved. In their view, the impact of the disaster remains was that the wider perception of Otsuchi became undeniably fixed as negative and spread throughout society at large (p. 192).

Although the age of respondents is not discussed in Sakaguchi’s research, most of her respondents who opposed the preservation were notably senior men over 65. This group represents a fraction within the local community that opposes transmitting the failures of town officials that did not evacuate in time. According to Sakaguchi (2021), the opposition to negative heritage preservation as expressed by these men shows the fear that other positive aspects of their hometown could be overshadowed by the promotion of negative images. Further, such promotion could also lead to an ongoing confrontation with the painful past of the Great East Japan Earthquake, loss of family
and friends, and, in the case of Otsuchi Townhall, questions of responsibility. Researchers have also highlighted a general tendency in Japan to avoid the dark aspects of history or questions of responsibility, such as “failed evacuation,” and favour forward-looking messages instead. For instance, regarding sites that represent the memory of historical tragedies such as World War II, researchers have criticized that mainly positive aspects have been put to the foreground (Sharpley & Kato, 2021; Wu et al, 2013). For example, visiting the 1945 atomic bomb sites of Hiroshima and Nagasaki or the former battlegrounds of World War II in Okinawa has been redefined positively through the term “peace tourism” (Yoneyama, 1999; Zwigenberg, 2014). At such sites, war itself is usually condemned but questions of responsibility and Japan’s role as an aggressor are rarely discussed. Gluck (1990) therefore speaks of exhibiting “history in a passive voice” in relation to the Hiroshima Peace Museum, “like the scene from a natural disaster, separated from any chain of historical events” (Zwigenberg, 2014, p. 2). Disaster heritage after 3.11 likewise tends to focus on the positive stories that can be told amidst the tragedies. Gerster and Fulco (forthcoming) indicate that the majority of the preserved disaster heritage sites after 3.11 convey stories of successful evacuation practices. However, forgetting negative or controversial aspects of the past may conversely increase the risk of repeating of similar tragedies. As we argue, one strength in so-called dark tourism is its highlighting of the dark aspects of history that bear important lessons. In the following section, we introduce a brief overview of the official post-disaster tourism programs in Iwate, Miyagi and Fukushima Prefectures based on their respective websites. As discussed, the branding of these programs continues the forward-looking tendency displayed in the presentation of other negative events.

Branding and promotion of dark tourism in post-3.11 Tohoku
Post-disaster tourism programs with a focus on the
Tohoku region

The following section explores how tourism was introduced as a way to support disaster-stricken regions from early on after the disaster. The promotion and branding of visits to the Tohoku region connects to the tendency to highlight positive aspects within traumatic events, which has occurred pre-3.11 as well. The Reconstruction Design Council soon set recording and conveying the lessons learned from the 2011 disasters as an important goal in the months following 3.11 (Reconstruction Design Council, 2011), as the promotion of tourism in 3.11 sites was also seen as an opportunity to provide disaster risk education. As a result of this aim, disaster-related tourism activities in Tohoku emphasize education and recovery. The Japanese government introduced and supported several tourism campaigns to the Tohoku area under the name of “Recovery Tourism” (fukkō kankō). The Tourism Agency (2011) emphasized that visits to the disaster areas could contribute to Japan’s recovery as a whole. Linked to the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, several marketing campaigns, such as the Tohoku Destination Campaign or Beyond 2020, were launched as well (JNTO, 2019; Tohoku Tourism Promotion Organization, 2021). In the prefectures of Fukushima, Miyagi and Iwate, the main disaster tourism concepts that emerged were “Reconstruction Tourism,” BOSAI + Tourism,” and “Hope Tourism.”

“Reconstruction Tourism” (fukkō tsūrizumu)

Following initiatives taken by the national government to link recovery and tourism, the Iwate Recovery Tourism Promotion Council introduced Reconstruction Tourism (fukkō tsūrizumu, literally Recovery Tourism), which they describe as follows:

Our goal is to increase the non-resident population (kōryū jinko) through domestic and international programs that promote learning about the disasters and engage in disaster education as “reconstruction tourism.” This will contribute to stabilizing and revitalizing the region and become a new employment resource (Iwate Recovery Tourism Promotion Council, Internet).

Although Iwate Prefecture uses this term the most proactively, activities promoted under reconstruction tourism encompass four of the most severely hit prefectures in the
3.11 disasters: Fukushima, Miyagi, Iwate, and Aomori. It is also these four prefectures and Sendai City, the capital of Miyagi prefecture, which are responsible for this program, its website and contents. The term “reconstruction tourism” connotates promoting tourism as a means to support the disaster-stricken regions. While the term encompasses visits to disaster sites, such as tsunami-inundated zones, it stresses the positive outcome of financial recovery for the regions through the leisure activity of tourism. As a result, the model for this promotion also includes local cultural activities such as hiking, fruit picking, or sake tasting that are not directly linked to disaster risk education. Without negative connotations, visitors can enjoy the nature, food, and local hot springs, and contribute to the local economy while touring disaster-affected sites. This perspective of disaster tourism does not emphasize the negative history of the region, a characteristic which emphasizes the local aversion to more negative terms such as dark tourism (dāku tsūrizumu) or negative heritage (fu no isan). Nevertheless, the concept of “reconstruction tourism” has its limitations, as the focus on reconstruction may characterize the Tohoku region as a disaster zone (hisaiichi), whereas this kind of attention in a country prone to natural hazards may otherwise decline with time.

“BOSAI + Tourism” (Bōsai Kankō; Disaster Risk Reduction Tourism)

The branding of BOSAI + Tourism originally started as a project between Sendai City, Miyagi Prefecture, and Tohoku University. Although the term “reconstruction tourism” was already known at the time of its creation, the developers were afraid that visitors may lose interest in supporting Tohoku through tourism once the “visible recovery phase” was declared finished and the disaster-stricken region was no longer featured prominently in the news (Shibayama, 2021, p. 26). The term bōsai (disaster risk reduction), however, stresses the learning experiences that visitors can gain by coming to Tohoku. In a country at high risk for natural hazards such as earthquakes, this opportunity for education offers ongoing incentive not only for general tourism, but also for school trips and company excursions. Furthermore, this concept shifts the perspective from local residents as “victims” towards a more active role as “survivors.” In Bosai tourism, survivors act as teachers to pass on what they learned through
experiencing the disaster and during the recovery process. Many of the promoted activities include survivor guided tours or survivor presentations before visitors are invited to enjoy local delicacies. Keeping the term BOSAI in roman letters when used in English is further meant to promote a Japanese type of disaster risk reduction abroad. Tohoku could thus become an international role model of disaster education through this teaching. The “plus” between Bosai and tourism is meant to provide a distinction between the two activities. The BOSAI + Tourism Website explains the merits of combining leisure activities and disaster education as follows:

Through learning the charm of tourist spots in these areas alongside Bosai, we can deepen our knowledge of the abundant nature, history and industries in the regions, which helps make BOSAI learning more understandable and effective. We believe that experiencing "BOSAI + Tourism" enables you to deepen your experience, knowledge and approach to disasters and that we can develop human resources who can flexibly respond to any disasters through these programs (Miyagi Prefecture, Internet).

Unlike other post-3.11 brands of disaster tourism, BOSAI + Tourism tries to make a distinction between educational activities and tourism which in this case is seen as mainly leisure activities. According to Shibayama, who is among the developers of the brand, “knowing the charms of the region through tourism, nature, history, and local industries, contributes to a better understanding of lessons learned from the 3.11 disaster” (Shibayama, 2021, p.26). However, this framing also reinforces the idea that tourism encompasses leisure activities, whereas educational aspects (gakushū) are separate from these activities. It is noteworthy though, that, whereas the “+” is kept in written forms, in spoken language the terms have been merged to “BOSAI tourism,” which conversely combines disaster education and tourism again.

“Hope Tourism” (hōpu tsūrizumu)
In addition to the earthquake and tsunami, Fukushima Prefecture continues to suffer from the aftermath of the Fukushima Dai’ichi Nuclear Disaster and harmful rumors about radioactivity in the region. As of 2021, seven municipalities partially remain under evacuation order and several thousand residents cannot return home. Forests are
not part of the decontamination plan and certain produce cannot be sold (Fukushima Prefecture, 2021). Further, outside of Japan the term “Fukushima,” originally the name of the Prefecture, its capital and other cities in Japan, became a synonym for the 3.11 disaster. This labelling consequently reinforced the negative image of the prefecture connected to the nuclear power plant accident. To counter this stereotype, tourism was seen as a chance not only to show people the current state of recovery of the coastal areas of Fukushima Prefecture, but to give hope to the local residents who will likely continue to face this situation for decades. The website “Hope Tourism. Learning x Fukushima” explains:

. . . there are lots of people in the disaster-affected areas striving for a bright future and working hard to make post-earthquake and nuclear disaster revitalization a reality. Hope Tourism offers participants the opportunity to actually see the places where the effect of the earthquake and nuclear disaster still remain, as well as the places where revitalization efforts are taking place. What’s more, participants can hear directly from people dedicated to regional revitalization. Through these experiences, participants can be actively involved in the handing down of lessons learned from the earthquake and nuclear disaster, as well as have the opportunity to reflect upon a number of current societal problems. This is all part of a new type of tourism we call ‘Hope Tourism’ (Fukushima Prefecture Tourism and Local Products Association, Internet).

This program developed by the Fukushima Prefecture Tourism and Local Products Association emphasizes three vital aspects that can be experienced through Hope tourism: witnessing the positive and negative sides of the current situation in Fukushima Prefecture, listening to survivors who continue to work towards recovery, and debating which visitors can participate in the current process in Fukushima Prefecture. Further, the program tries to connect some of the current issues in Fukushima Prefecture to ongoing problems in other regions in Japan and abroad, as can be seen from the examples given on the Hope Tourism website: “Whilst considering the current state in Fukushima and current revitalization efforts, participants are invited to contemplate and debate about social challenges, such as aging populations, decreasing
birth rates, community decline, the loss of industrial infrastructure, and energy problems.”

Model courses of Hope Tourism contain visits to the TEPCO Decommissioning Archive Center, towns that used to be or remain partially under evacuation orders, and participation in workshops and talks with local residents. The website explains: “For Hope Tourism, rather than thinking of visits to local areas as being those to ‘disaster-affected areas,’ we think of them as areas continuing on the path to local revitalization. We believe that it is important for people to see these places with their own eyes” (Fukushima Prefecture Tourism and Local Products Association, Internet).

This brief overview suggests that Hope Tourism emphasizes the positive aspects of visiting disaster affected areas and frames participation in this tourism as contributing to the recovery process. However, it may be hard for visitors to critically evaluate the ongoing recovery process if their visits, such as visits to facilities run by TEPCO with explanations conducted by TEPCO employees, are conveyed as giving hope to locals. Further, similar to “Recovery” or “Reconstruction tourism,” the term “Hope” is closely linked to the disaster itself and thus may reinforce a place identity as a disaster site with visitors “bringing hope to the people” while locals become passive victims.

As can be seen from these prefectural post-disaster tourism promotion efforts, the three most severely affected prefectures try to brand post-disaster tourism to Tohoku as a resource for recovery and disaster education. Ten years after the disaster, tourism is being promoted as an altruistic act in some cases which may give hope to the survivors still suffering from the consequences of 3.11. Yet, as will be explained in the following section, the opinions of practitioners and locals on the marketization and branding of post-3.11 disaster tourism are mixed.

Local conflicts, negotiations and agencies

The above examples demonstrate how some of the positive effects of post-3.11 disaster tourism such as recovery and education are used in its marketization. However, local residents have also opposed tourism in their regions for a number of reasons. One reason is the potential dissemination of a negative image of the so-called dark tourism destinations (Carr, 2017; Dehoorne & Lee, 2013; Sakaguchi, 2021). Another reason...
involves the possibility of visitors acting in disrespectful ways (Buda & McIntosh, 2013). An episode of the Netflix show “Dark Tourist” which was aired in 2018 revealed the potential insensitivity associated with dark tourism in post-disaster locations when the host assumed that the food he consumed in Namie Town would be contaminated and entered damaged buildings without permission, while another tour member claimed that radiation levels were higher than at Chernobyl (Ryall, 2018). Fukushima Prefecture and Japan’s Reconstruction Agency heavily criticized the episode for showing disrespectful and unsafe behaviour, while failing to explain the actual situation in Fukushima Prefecture accurately (Ryall, 2018). The Netflix incident demonstrates the risks that are connected to tourism to disaster areas as residents have little influence over who will join tours, how they behave, the impressions they get from their participation, and if the image they share corresponds with the positive image the prefectural governments plan to distribute through their forms of tourism. In interviews, local residents from other municipalities also expressed concerns that turning their suffering into a tourist attraction could attract people who would not behave respectfully. Likewise, Satoru Kusano, the chairman of the Sanriku Railway Company, mentioned that their “earthquake learning train,” a tour in which visitors can learn about the disaster while riding through the affected areas, was also viewed by some locals as an exploitation of their suffering. Shibayama (2021, p.26), who acts as an academic advisor for BOSAI Tourism programs, stressed that “in the beginning, Bosai Tourism did not only meet support. Just by hearing that term, residents would tell me not to make profit of the disaster” (hisaichi wo urimono ni suruna!). Shun Ito, who regularly shares his experiences as a disaster survivor in “kataribe bus tours” organized by the Hotel Kanyo in Minamisanriku, revealed that he was also often accused of guiding tourists through the area as a way of profiting from the disaster. “It can hurt a lot if you are told something like that by your neighbours,” he said in an interview (2021). “But I still think that we need to keep talking about this disaster.” These expressions reveal concerns over marketing loss and are part of the critique for dark or disaster tourism as a brand. Above all, for the bereaved, it may increase their pain if visitors fail to act respectfully when visiting sites connected to the loss of family members.
Further, survivors may be particularly sensitive regarding the representation of political issues linked to the disaster. Evacuees from Fukushima Prefecture in particular conveyed in interviews that official tourism programs and the newly opened “The Great East Japan Earthquake and Nuclear Disaster Memorial Museum” in Futaba Town promoted an overly positive image of the handling of the nuclear disaster and therefore skewed perceptions of the state of recovery among visitors who may not refer to other sources of information. Similarly, locals of Taro Town in Iwate Prefecture criticized that the necessity of building even higher sea walls than before was overemphasized in disaster tours and did not reflect the views of residents who opposed them. These criticisms challenge the representational functions of post-disaster tourism. However, survivor groups continue to engage in activities that teach visitors about disaster risk reduction, and researchers have indicated that disaster tourism can aid in disseminating information about the survivors’ experiences. Tanaka et al (2021, p. 157) underline that tourism in disaster-stricken regions may increase the understanding of difficulties within the recovery process through encouraging exchange between disaster-affected areas and non-affected areas (hisaichi and misaichi). Similarly, a kataribe (disaster storyteller) who guides visitors through areas affected by the Fukushima nuclear accident commented that the “The Great East Japan Earthquake and Nuclear Disaster Memorial Museum,” although it reminds people of the tragic disaster, at least brings visitors to the area so that she could share her own views and opinions on the recovery process with them (interview February 2021).

Beyond giving locals the opportunity to share their opinions with visitors, the need to spread local knowledge on disaster mitigation is stressed by survivors who engage in tourism activities (see also Nagamatsu et al, 2021). Kumiko Motoda who has become one of the most famous kataribe and continues to guide visitors through her hometown Taro in Iwate Prefecture is one such survivor. In the early aftermath of the disaster, she was not in favour of visitors coming to her hometown as her family members were still missing. “And then I remembered,” she explained at the World BOSAI forum in Sendai, 2019.

My father was 90 years old at that time. He had survived the war and the 1933 tsunami. When he drank, he would always talk about these experiences. I would
only think, oh, here we go again. Once he said, there will be another big tsunami soon. I did not really listen. I didn’t expect that I would ever experience a tsunami. Without any basis, I just expected that I would be okay. (...) I want many people to come here, and we will give our best to guide everyone. I want as many people as possible to visit us, so that our experiences can be of use and lives can be saved. (...) If it is pupils who actually wanted to go to Disneyland for their final school trip, usual tourism, or dark tourism... There might be various reasons why people come here, and I am fine with any of those. I am convinced that by coming here anybody will gain something. It is important that we take this as an opportunity to pass on and make use of the lessons learned (Motoda, 2019).

Motoda expresses a narrative that is often heard from kataribe in Tohoku. If the stories of the grief they experienced may prevent similar disasters, for example through explaining the significance of evacuation measures, many kataribe see it as their duty to guide visitors to disaster remains and relay their experiences.

The significance of tourism for recovery was also emphasized in an interview with Noriko Abe, who runs several hotels in the Sanriku region. After the earthquake struck, several hundred people evacuated to her hotel in Minamisanriku and stayed there for several months. She initiated the preservation of several buildings that belonged to her family as disaster heritage sites. These buildings had played important community roles as weddings halls and cultural centers, and many people had fled to the rooftops during the tsunami. Alongside this preservation, Abe started a kataribe bus tour which leads hotel guests through the disaster-stricken areas while a hotel staff who survived the tsunami explains their experiences and the community’s road to recovery. In an interview, Abe explains why she considers tourism of the disaster-affected areas to be vital (2019):

You cannot really imagine the hardships caused by disasters until you experience something like that. But there will certainly be more disasters in the future, and I don’t want anyone to go through what we had to endure. I immediately understood that survivors can contribute to disaster risk reduction. Our experiences are an important asset for that. To disseminate our knowledge, it is vital that people come
here to the place where the disaster unfolded. And by coming here, visitors contribute to the revitalization of the region. In addition to the physical damage, news kept coming in about businesses that closed although they survived the tsunami. The hotel industry is connected to all kinds of industries. If we stay in business, there will be jobs for butchers, farmers, tea merchants... The less people continue to live here, the more important it is to have visitors who support the residents (Abe, 2019).

As a hotel owner, leading figure in the promotion of post-disaster tourism, and disaster survivor, Noriko Abe expresses the significance of tourism within the overall recovery process, including ongoing support of local businesses. Ultimately, the promotion of tourism to disaster sites is a double-edged sword. Contrary to the intentions of prefectural governments, it may contribute to prolonging a negative image of the region and reinforcing victimization. Also, residents may feel that their experiences are not fully reflected or falsely portrayed through some tourism programs. Further, visitors may not behave respectfully or be aware of the current state of recovery or the survivors’ ongoing grief. Such conflicting opinions towards dark tourism can lead to further tensions between locals and visitors. Regardless of these concerns, many of our interviewees expressed that tourism programs provide them with the agency to share their experiences and views on the disaster and recovery efforts. Most people involved in post-disaster tourism programs assert its significant role in disaster education as an important reason for them to continue disseminating the so-called “negative” heritage of their region, despite the criticism they may face. These examples reveal that post-disaster tourism is an ongoing and complex process involving negotiations and conflicts, determining who will lead, represent, and benefit from the industry.

Discussion

As in other dark tourism destinations, in post-disaster Tohoku the promotion of tourism remains a debated topic. The Great East Japan Earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster caused tremendous loss and grief and more than a decade later local residents continue to suffer under the consequences of the disaster. Whereas some people feel
the need to pass on lessons learned, others do not want to be constantly reminded of
the painful past or for their beloved hometowns to be reduced to a negative image of
disaster. Among these tensions, post-disaster tourism is constructed and promoted as a
learning experience.

As discussed, official post-disaster tourism is branded as a positive activity that
highlights its educational merits and its role in the recovery process of the disaster-
affected areas. However, such attempts may align with locals’ concerns about
spreading a negative image of their hometowns when promoted as “dark tourism”
destinations (Sakaguchi, 2021). In this sense, the promotion of post-disaster tourism
repeats branding concepts seen in other dark tourist destinations in Japan, such as the
promotion of tourism to sites related to WWII under the name of “peace tourism”
(Yoneyama, 1999; Zwigenberg, 2014), or the presentation of tragic legacies in ways
that do not question responsibility (Sharpley & Kato, 2021; Wu et al, 2013). Although
interviews with practitioners revealed that the focus on positive images may help
survivors cope with their experiences and be empowered through contributing to
disaster education (Tanaka et al, 2013), some survivors criticized this focus on positive
aspects within the recovery or do not find their experiences represented properly.
Furthermore, turning away from negative aspects in history, such as instances of
failures to save lives, undermines one of the merits that dark tourism has to offer, which
is learning from dark or tragic events in history. This focus on painful topics which
reminds viewers of mistakes and raises questions of responsibility potentially puts them
in a position to identify with the topic presented. Tragic examples from the Great East
Japan Earthquake such as Otsuchi Townhall where city officials in charge of evacuation
procedures died in the tsunami may make visitors, and even more so locals, feel
uncomfortable because they continue to confront people with painful questions, such as
“Why did these people have to die?,” “Did they or somebody else make a mistake?,” or
“What would I have done in their position?” Despite the risks that some people may
visit post-disaster sites for unethical reasons such as entertainment (Bornmann, 2018;
Meschkank, 2011; Rolfes, 2010; Schaller, 2007), as shown in the “Dark Tourist” show
example, there is also a potential that visiting these sites and listening to the story of
survivors may evoke empathy and self-reflection in the visitors. As a result, visitors may
remember the lessons survivors shared and become challenged to consider measures which will prevent future tragedies, such as being constantly prepared for a sudden disaster.

This learning potential combined with the chances for survivors to express their views on what happened during and after the 3.11 disasters reveals why the majority of local residents who consented to interviews were not opposed to visitors coming to learn about the disasters. Especially those who worked as *kataribe* expressed the need to continue sharing their experiences and having visitors come to the disaster-affected areas to achieve the kind of sensory learning which cannot be achieved through news or books. Even the men Sakaguchi (2021) quoted in her research as being against the preservation of Otsuchi Town Hall disaster remains were not against speaking about the disaster itself when they considered its scope and death toll as a source of shame for the residents and the community. One of these respondents actually engaged in disaster storytelling and is quoted as follows (Sakaguchi, 2021, p. 189): “I have a duty to tell what happened, as it is, to different people, precisely because it is shameful.”

Like this man, most survivors share the opinion that their experiences should be disseminated to reduce future disasters. Landsberg (2007, p. 628) describes this conflict of wanting to forget while feeling the need to prevent future tragedies as follows: “With memory comes a sense of obligation and responsibility: remembering is a moral injunction.”

**Conclusion**

In this paper, we explored the challenges and merits of post-disaster tourism promotion after the Great East Japan Earthquake. Japanese case examples of post-disaster tourism after the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster in the Tohoku region could be described as dark tourism, yet such visits have been rebranded through positive terms such as reconstruction tourism, BOSAI tourism, and hope tourism. The foregrounding of positive aspects, such as education and recovery, connects to previous examples of engaging with negative heritage positively, such as “peace tourism” in the atomic bomb sites in Japan. It is important to note that this research concentrated on national and prefectural examples of post-disaster tourism branding activities. The national and local governments portray a strong interest in promoting a
positive image of the disaster areas through their recovery messages, despite the many issues that this tourism generates. Despite the aversion to dark or post-disaster tourism, many survivors see it as an important tool for sharing their experiences. Although many survivors criticized the capitalization of their suffering, most people interviewed were in favour of distributing knowledge on disaster mitigation and saw the visits to the disaster-affected regions as the best means to impart that knowledge. Interviewees also expressed how tourism supported sectors of the local economy as well, therefore contributing to the overall recovery of the region. Discussions with locals also showed that positive terms and connotations can actually influence a more positive image of recovering regions and thus become a source of empowerment. Although emphasizing positive aspects may overshadow ongoing issues during the recovery process, the ultimate potential of “dark” and post-disaster tourism lies in learning from mistakes in history so as not to repeat them again. Lessons learned through visiting places connected to disasters can only be conveyed if controversial aspects such as questions of responsibility are delivered alongside forward-looking messages of hope. Even residents who want to avoid shameful images feel the necessity to share the lessons learned in the disaster, if done in respectful and sustainable ways, as shown in the example with the respondents who opposed preserving the Otsuchi Town Hall disaster remains yet supported relaying disaster stories to visitors. Through these dark aspects combined with visiting the actual sites of disasters and speaking to survivors, visitors will directly encounter the emotions and scenes connected to the disasters and learn and remember how to prevent similar tragedies from recurring as a result.

Acknowledgments

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