

# From Devastation to Discovery of Hope for Tomorrow: Efforts towards Recovery from the Great East Japan Earthquake

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## 1. Outline of the Great East Japan Earthquake

On March 11, 2011, the eastern half of Japan was hit by a catastrophic earthquake, the fourth strongest earthquake ever recorded in world history. Thirty minutes later, the biggest tsunami in the history of Japan struck the Pacific coast. Approximately 20,000 persons were missing or perished in this disaster and total financial damage is estimated at 16,900,000,000,000 yen, or two hundred and twenty (220) billion U.S. dollars. The Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant lost its emergency power, resulting in a very serious nuclear power plant disaster. Even seventeen months since then, many residents in nearby towns and villages remain obliged to evacuate. The government, the National Diet, and the private sectors established the committees and commissions for the Fukushima accident with the aim of conducting an investigation to determine the causes of the accident. Final reports of those committees and commissions were released until July 2012 and summaries or full reports in English are posted on the websites of those organizations.<sup>1</sup> However, these reports are silent about the effects of the nuclear accident of official documents and the vital records for the operation of the plant and therefore they remain unclear.

The Great East Japan Earthquake was truly a once in a millennium disaster that changed the way of life and concept of values of the Japanese people. Foreign media have reported on this disaster and we were deeply touched by the aid, support and messages of condolence from people worldwide. I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude for the friendship and solidarity shown by such people. They were great encouragement and a source of energy for the victims to take action towards reconstruction.

In this disaster, many victims lost family, assets or work, or even everything they had. What has supported those who lost all hopes and dreams? In my view, it was the “sense of evanescence of life,” or “*Mujo-kan*.” “*Mujo*” is a Buddhist world view. It means everything in the world will perish someday and nothing in the world is unchanging or eternal. All Japanese are familiar with the opening line in *The Tale of Heike*, “The sound of the *Gion Shōja* bells echoes the impermanence of all things.” It effectively reflects the deeply heartfelt emotion of the Japanese people that “Living beings are destined to disappear and those who meet are destined to part.” It also reminds me of the Buddhist view that “Everything is nothing but emptiness.” When you remember this concept, you realize that the only path left to take is to restart from this severe reality.

We can live because we are supported by others. Many people came to help the victims, not only from Japan but around the world. We learned that we had foreign *tomodachi*, namely friends. Gradually the victims found their inner voice, telling them it was time for them to welcome and support those *tomodachi* who had come to help. Relationships between people, regions or countries,

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<sup>1</sup> Investigation Committee on the Accident at the Fukushima Nuclear Power Stations of Tokyo Electric Power Company: <http://icanps.go.jp/eng> (accessed in July 2012)  
National Diet of Japan Fukushima Nuclear Accident Independent Investigation Commission: <http://naic.go.jp/en/> (accessed in July 2012)

and the circle of *tomodachi* created strong ties or *kizuna*. And it was in *kizuna* that the victims found hope. When the victims felt that they were connected to others with *kizuna*, they began to care for each other, encourage each other and smiled, which surprised many people around the world.

## 2. Initiatives of the Japanese Government

Now, I would like to speak about the initiatives of the Japanese Government. The Japanese government did recognize the need to preserve records of this disaster from an early stage. Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary was the quickest to take action and issued instructions within a month that each ministry must carefully preserve records and materials of the facts and processes of the great earthquake as provision against disasters that may occur in future.

In April 2011, one month after the disaster, the government established the Reconstruction Design Council (RDC), composed of experts under the Prime Minister. Following discussion on the direction of comprehensive reconstruction from the Great East Japan Earthquake, RDC submitted a recommendation to the Prime Minister under the title of “Towards Reconstruction: Hope beyond the Disaster” in June 2011.

In the “Seven Principles for the Reconstruction Framework,” the first principle stated that “For us, the surviving, there is no other starting point for the path to recovery than to remember and honor the many lives that have been lost. Accordingly, we shall record the disaster for eternity, including through the creation of memorial forests and monuments, and we shall have the disaster scientifically analyzed by a broad range of scholars to draw lessons that will be shared with the world and passed down to posterity.”<sup>2</sup> It also proclaimed the necessity for establishing the Disaster Recovery Archives that will serve as an organization for preserving and passing on records of the disaster as well as a source of information.

In July, the Reconstruction Headquarters in response to the Great East Japan Earthquake of the government announced the Basic Guidelines, and presented a plan and approach for the next decade, which was designated as a reconstruction period.

The following items were included in the principles to ensure the preservation, conservation and restoration of records and archives. Systems for use and streamlining of the organization were also included.

- ◇ Repair and conservation of cultural properties and historical materials
- ◇ Implementation of research and study on this disaster, including international collaborative study
- ◇ Development of a system of collection, storage and disclosure of records and lessons taken from the earthquake, tsunami disaster and nuclear accident
- ◇ Conservation and preservation of official documents in the stricken area
- ◇ Promotion of digitalization not only of records and lessons but also related documents and visual images such as regional information and books, by utilizing information and communication technology
- ◇ Establishment of an integrated mechanism of storage and application that enables anyone from in and out of Japan to have access to the records and other relevant information

Later, legal systems and fiscal measures were developed, and various projects based on the

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<sup>2</sup> See the page 2 of the RDC report at: <http://www.cas.go.jp/jp/fukkou/english/pdf/report20110625.pdf> (accessed in July 2012)

Basic Guidelines have been planned and implemented to date. Regarding the projects related to archives, here are some examples: Restoration Project for Damaged Official Documents organized by the National Archives of Japan; digital archive formulation project by both the Ministry of the Internal Affairs and Communications and the National Diet Library, in which the National Archives of Japan is also taking part; and the project for the repair and restoration of damaged cultural properties by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology.

In 2012, the Reconstruction Agency was established as a state organ to plan, coordinate and implement governmental measures for disaster recovery, and a Minister for Reconstruction was appointed. Approximately 18 trillion yen was allocated for the reconstruction budget.

Meanwhile, a huge controversy arose when it emerged that no conference minutes had been taken in 10 of the 15 committees established by the government in response to the Great East Japan Earthquake, including the Nuclear Emergency Response Headquarters. The Public Records and Archives Management Commission in the Cabinet Office researched this issue and released a report on the cause of the problem and the improvement strategy. The improvement strategy proposed the standardization of the content of records to be created and preserved in all governmental committees and other related meetings in the event of a “historical emergency situation” that threatened or caused serious harm to the lives, bodies, and property of the people, as in the case of the Great East Japan Earthquake. For instance, it states that, if a “historical emergency situation” occurs, within any “decision-making body” where the government makes decisions or gives approvals, “the following records must be created and preserved: minutes or summary of the meeting with dates and times of meetings, venues, lists of attendees, agendas, all opinions claimed and names of the speakers; documents on decisions or agreements adopted at meetings, and hand-outs distributed at meetings.” The Cabinet Office requested all ministries concerned to ensure an appropriate approach to all administrative documents related to the Great East Japan Earthquake, including setting rules on titles, filing methods, record retention periods, appropriate preservation, and the transfer method. Furthermore, the Cabinet Office and the National Archives strove to disseminate a basic policy for the transfer of administrative document files on the Great East Japan Earthquake to the National Archives. Records on the actions taken by the government in response to the Great East Japan Earthquake must be shared by the whole nation and society for generations, given its historical and political importance. We must utilize the lessons learned for the future. I am convinced the government must continue to work on a long-term basis to create and preserve accurate records of the disaster and ensure the appropriate transfer of such records to the National Archives.

### 3. Initiatives of the National Archives of Japan

Now I would like to report on the post-disaster initiatives of the National Archives of Japan. The National Archives posted a message of condolence to the victims of the disaster on its website on March 18. Since then, we have tried to provide as much support as possible in accordance with requests from the stricken area.

Initiatives taken in 2011-2012 included the following:

- ◇ Reported on the results of field research in the stricken area and exchanged ideas about them at the Annual Meeting of the Directors of Public Archives
- ◇ Sent staff to the public archives and local governments in the stricken area to conduct inspections and to exchange opinions on how the disaster affected the public archives there

- ◇ Implemented a pilot project for restoration support of damaged official documents at Miyako city, Iwate
- ◇ Implemented the Restoration Project for Damaged Official Documents in 5 cities and towns in the stricken area based on the pilot project conducted in the previous year

A number of local governments in the stricken area did not have public archives, meaning official documents were preserved directly in the city or town offices. In some local governments, the office buildings themselves were totally washed away by tsunami. An inspection proved that numerous official documents in local governments were damaged and neglected in the stricken area. According to the latest survey conducted by the National Archives in 127 cities and towns in 3 prefectures (Iwate, Miyagi, and Fukushima), official documents of 26 local governments were affected by the disaster, 18 of which were damaged by tsunami water. To support the strong need for prompt restoration of the damaged documents in local governments, the National Archives, in coordination with the government and other affiliated organizations, and supported by governmental financial measures, has launched the “Restoration Project for Damaged Official Documents” in January 2012.

The project contents were based on requests from local governments in the stricken area. National Archives of Japan conducted the following:

- 1) Sending experts in restoration techniques and management staff
- 2) Employing local people to work on restoring the damaged official documents
- 3) Training the employees in restoration techniques
- 4) Procuring and providing the equipment and items necessary for restoration

In the three months between January and March 2012, the National Archives, despite its limited human resources, sent the staff for the project to five local governments that requested support as shown in Table 1. During the period, the National Archives contributed a total of 22 staff members, 268 person-days (i.e. the work was equivalent to the amount of work done by 268 persons in a working day), educated 110 locally hired trainees and restored approximately 1,200 volumes / 240,000 sheets of official documents.

(Table 1)

Name of the Local Government	Rikuzentakata City, Iwate Prefecture	Kesenuma City, Miyagi Prefecture	Sendai City, Miyagi Prefecture	Ishinomaki City Miyagi Prefecture	Yamada Town, Iwate Prefecture
Period (net days of operation) (excluding Sat., Sun., and holidays)	2012.1.16~3.9 (40 days)	2012.1.16~3.9 (40 days)	2012.1.23~3.2 (30 days)	2012.2.6~3.30 (39 days)	2012.2.20~3.30 (29 days)
Number of Staff sent	4 54 person-days	5 59 person-days	11 56 person-days	7 55 person-days	6 44 person-days
Successful Restoration Trainees	23	23	18	23	23
Results of the work	240 volumes 62,188 sheets of paper	145 volumes 41,175 sheets of paper	489 volumes 30,011 sheets of paper	250 volumes 71,588 sheets of paper	123 volumes 36,778 sheets of paper

The training focused mainly on acquiring emergency restoration techniques for damaged official documents by removing mud and mold with water. The technique of cleaning documents is based on that developed by a volunteer group, the Tokyo Document Recovery Assistance Force. It is easy enough for anyone to acquire it within a short training period. We could also contribute to the economic recovery of the stricken area by hiring local people. This method has proved very effective as an emergency restoration measure when a large quantity of materials were water-damaged as in this case.

This restoration project was highly acclaimed by both local governments and local residents. From July 2012, we launched a new project to offer a training program to teach techniques of a higher level, such as restoration of missing parts with Japanese paper, backing and book binding.

#### 4. Collecting information on the scale of damage and conservation activities by the archival institutions

Next, I will report on the initiatives of other archival institutions. Soon after the disaster, the Japan Society of Archives Institutions (JSAI), a member of ICA's Category B, started researching the state of damage in all member associations and reported the results on its website. At the same time, JSAI joined the Cultural Property Rescue Program launched by the Cultural Affairs Agency.

In the stricken area, university faculties and students, staff of archival institutions and historical researchers in the area worked as volunteers in a group named "*Shiryō* Net," which actively took part in the rescue activities. Ms. Kazuko Sasaki of the Kobe University will report separately on those activities in more detail. Rescue activities organized by museum curators and librarians were also active and focused mainly on relieving museums and libraries in the stricken area. Since then, the collaboration between archives, museums and libraries has gathered strength.

#### 5. Tasks for the future – Hope for tomorrow is born from the preservation of records

Before closing, I would like to point out the challenges we face today.

The first point is the problem of restoring and conserving damaged records and archives. One of the lessons we learned was the need to establish something similar to medical triage. Given the huge volume of materials damaged all at once, and the serious shortage of restoration staff and facilities, archivists were obliged to temporarily evaluate, select and prioritize the order of rescue of damaged historical materials. We also face another important task to determine a means of decontaminating records and materials contaminated by radiation from the accident in the Nuclear Power Plant. We experienced the atomic bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but we have little knowledge and experience with the decontamination of documents and we would like to request cooperation from global experts.

The second point is the need to review disaster prevention measures against records and archives. Digital documents were threatened by electricity outage for many days in large area. To establish disaster prevention measures for vital records and records in various media, our prime task is to examine the damages from this disaster in depth to safeguard archives from future disasters.

The third point is collecting, preserving and disclosing the disaster records. Great East Japan Earthquake was the gigantic disaster occurred in the digital information society of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Thousands of photographs and moving images were posted on the web after the quake. We are facing the challenges of how to select, preserve, and disclose a large amount of records about this disaster in a variety of media. Today, the central government, local governments, universities and private corporations launched digital archive projects for the Great East Japan Earthquake. Mr. Toshinari Nagasaka will speak in detail about the digital archive project for this disaster.

The fourth point is the collection and long-term preservation of the huge volume of survey records after the nuclear accident such as measurement records of radiation dose, records collected for compiling the final reports of the investigation committees, and measurement records of radioactive materials contained in food or other materials. The problem of how and by whom it could be done is difficult to solve. Currently, private researchers and individual institutions are keeping records of radiation measurement, but it is essential for scientists and archivists to review in cooperation the preservation and disclosure methods of them.

Various suggestions and plans regarding the handling of the records and documents related to the disaster and reconstruction have been presented by the related institutions including the National Archives and the National Diet Library. We believe that our initiatives to make the records and documents of the Great East Japan Earthquake sustainable and accessible for 500 or even 1000 years, will be a cornerstone, allowing the archiving culture to take root and develop in Japanese society.

Every year around June 9, the International Archives Day, the Annual Meeting of the Directors of Public Archives is held in Japan. This is a conference where directors from about 100 public archives, national and local, get together. At the meeting on June 8, 2012, a statement regarding the preservation of the records of the Great East Japan Earthquake was unanimously adopted. In the statement, a pledge was made to cooperate together in the future, under the shared recognition about the following points:

- Official documents in each area are the “community’s treasure.” It is crucial that damaged official documents be properly restored and preserved;
- It is our duty to preserve as public documents the records related to the recent disaster in order to pass them down to posterity; and
- Efforts will be made to digitize the above-mentioned records under close mutual cooperation among public archives for the purpose of public access.

I would like to share this statement with all of you here today.

Just like the opening words in *The Tale of Heike*, I know that all man-made things will perish. Even if they perished once, I nevertheless believe that we can reconstruct them again. I hope that our path to recovery will be full of hope for tomorrow by strengthening ties and solidarity with our friends worldwide.

Thank you very much for your attention.