

# Message from Fukushima

**Anne Kaneko** is from North Yorkshire and studied Japanese at university. She was living and working in Fukushima prefecture at the time of the earthquake and tsunami. She wrote a series of letters and blog posts from 2011-2014 about what life was like in the aftermath of the disaster. This is an edited version of her final blog.

**Tuesday, 11 March 2014** Over and Out

It's 3 years since that fateful day, 11th March 2011, 2:46 in the afternoon. The day everything changed and time stood still. It's become a measure of time. People talk of things happening 'before the disaster' (*shinsaimae* 震災前) and 'after the disaster' (*shinsaigo* 震災後). But there's little appetite here for anniversaries. The nuclear disaster is not something that's over and done with. There are 130,000 people still displaced, most of whom still have no clear idea of their future or where they will live. Contaminated water continues to accumulate at Fukushima Daiichi\*. Reactor 4 is the only one which people can go into. Radiation is so high in the other three that no one can get near. The radioactive materials that fell over Fukushima prefecture have been collected but the interim storage facilities have not yet been completed so the stuff sits in people's gardens, parks and schools. In the former exclusion zone decontamination is progressing but it's way behind schedule; it will only be carried out once; and it does not cover the woods. No, the accident is far from over.

It's been a life changing experience. There were no phones or electricity for the first few days after the disaster. No water for a week. We all learnt to be self reliant. I bet there isn't a household in Fukushima that doesn't have at least two weeks' stock of food and water, and gas for heat and cooking. People get used to being able to buy anything from the convenience store at any time of day or night and don't know how to cope when things go wrong. We've learnt to stand on our own two feet, take charge, and depend on no one.

\*Fukushima Daiichi is the name of the nuclear power plant damaged by the earthquake and tsunami.

We also learnt to be aware and question important issues that affect our lives. I personally am still undecided about nuclear power. It may be a necessary interim measure to prevent the serious worldwide consequences of global warming. Fukushima prefecture has proclaimed - for obvious reasons and quite rightly - that it will be non nuclear and I uphold that stance. But we should all be concerned about nuclear waste. People in Fukushima have seen the piles of waste in their own backyards and experienced the fear it brings. And this is only low level waste. The spent fuels and waste from decommissioning are much more dangerous. Reprocessing (in order to re-use the waste as fuel) produces plutonium which can be used for nuclear weapons. For these reasons the vast majority of Japanese citizens favour a gradual withdrawal from nuclear power. The current government seems set on re-opening the country's nuclear plants. One hopes public opinion will win out over the long term.

Finally, I'd like to pay tribute to the women and young people of Fukushima. After the earthquake the children had a month off school and the scenes on the TV were horrific. Families here suffered severe stress over fears of radiation and many families were separated. It's still common for the husband to work in Fukushima and his family to live somewhere else. March is graduation time, the end of the school year, and in interviews on TV and essays written by children many of them say they want to join the police or fire department, or become teachers and nurses for they saw these people in action after the disaster and admired the way they took charge. Or if a kid wants to be, say a baseball player, they'll add that then they'll be able to work with kids and give them a good time. Older students often say they'll go to university in Tokyo to get qualifications but hope to come back to help. Children were traumatised but the women here protected the children and the children have become strong, committed and public spirited. You can't help but feel optimistic about Fukushima's future.

Thank you for reading this blog. If it wasn't for your support I would never have kept it going. Good bye,

Anne