

The Great East Japan Earthquake One Year On: Reports From The Field 東日本大震災より一年—現場よりの報告

Christopher Thompson

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Introduction

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On March 11th, 2011 at 2:26 p.m. Japan Time, a magnitude 9.0 earthquake struck a section of ocean floor off the coast of Northeast Honshu. The quake unleashed a giant tsunami that rose to over 10 meters in height. Washing over the Sanriku coastline inland from locations in Aomori prefecture southward, it devastated the villages, towns, and cities in its path in Iwate, Miyagi, and Fukushima prefectures, killing initially over 20,000 residents. Thousands more were later reported dead. Coupled with the tsunami-caused near meltdown of reactors at the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant, this multifaceted disaster, unparalleled in Japanese history, has changed life in the region forever. The following “Reports From The Field” are an attempt by four American anthropologists intimately familiar with Northeast Japan through decades of fieldwork, to reflect on exactly what happened on 3.11, to assess the nature of the destruction and havoc, and to consider the future of the region, and Japan.

The articles compiled here originated as part of a roundtable session at the 110th Annual Meetings of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) held in Montreal in mid November 2011. For this special double roundtable session, sponsored by AAA’s East Asia Section, cultural anthropologists Christopher Thompson (Ohio University) and

Dawn Grimes-MacLellan (Earlham College) invited their colleagues with a variety of experience in Northeast Japan to assess local developments on the ground there since 3.11. The articles that follow were developed out of four of these AAA roundtable presentations.

By design, each article differs in style and content, ranging from Kelly’s eloquent reflective essay, which serves to frame the ethnographically focused reports that follow by Delany, Grimes-MacLellan and Thompson, which are based on their post 3.11 experiences in several of the tsunami ravaged communities on the Sanriku coast. In a distinct way, each author provides an up-close view of the tsunami disaster from both a personal and a professional point of view. All papers reflect Kelly’s challenge to resist predicting a bleak future for post 3.11 Tohoku, and instead to imagine what now might be possible moving forward given what we know about the region’s past, the nature of the disaster, and preliminary societal responses. These articles are presented here for the purpose of providing a benchmark for what has happened since 3.11 in Fukushima, Iwate, and Miyagi prefectures and to help envision a positive but realistic future for the Tohoku region.

Christopher S. Thompson is Associate Professor of Japanese Language and Culture and Chair of the Department of Linguistics at Ohio University. He is co-editor of *Wearing Cultural Styles In Japan: Concepts of Tradition and Modernity in Practice* and numerous articles on Tōhoku culture and traditions.

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This is part of the series **One-Year After The Great East Japan Earthquake: Reports From The Field** edited by Christopher S. Thompson and Dawn Grimes-MacLellan.

The complete series is comprised of the following articles:

1. Christopher S. Thompson, **The Great East Japan Earthquake One Year on: Reports From The Field**

2. William W. Kelly, **Tohoku's Futures:**

Predicting Outcomes or Imagining Possibilities

3. Alyne Elizabeth Delaney, **A Report From One Miyagi Fishing Community**

4. Dawn Grimes-MacLellan, **Students in the Field at the Site of the Great East Japan Earthquake**

5. Christopher S. Thompson, **Local Perspectives On the Tsunami Disaster: Untold Stories From the Sanriku Coast**

See the complete list of APJ resources on the 3.11 earthquake, tsunami and nuclear power meltdown, and the state and societal responses to it [here](#).