

Report from Tohoku Part II

The Museums of Rikuzentakata

By Lois Lydens

The Sea and Shell Museum Rikuzentakata

"Fear the sea, respect the sea, love the sea." (Quote from fishermen of northern Japan)

On the entryway wall of the now-destroyed Sea and Shell Museum in Rikuzentakata is a charming folk painting that portrays the bucolic life of the tight-knit community of Rikuzentakata, Iwate Prefecture, Tohoku, Japan. Miraculously, the painting was only slightly damaged by the tsunami that engulfed the museum. It remains in its original position on the wall, surrounded by the broken interior of the museum. In the painting, the rhythms of the seasons of life, such as rice-planting or festival drumming, are depicted. There are also scenes showing the great natural beauty of the area, including seashells, butterflies, flowers, birds and trees. The mural serves as a visual summary of Rikuzentakata's natural history.

The 9.0 magnitude earthquake and subsequent tsunami of 11 March 2011 completely destroyed that way of life as the wall of waves swept away thousands of people's lives and changed the community forever. The entire town of Rikuzentakata was destroyed, including schools, day-care centres, the hospital and government buildings. Even today, many of Rikuzentakata's residents reside in emergency housing as they await decisions about when and how the town will be rebuilt.

The town's famous beach, Takata Matsubara, has always been a popular tourist destination. It was known for its beautiful views, which included the vistas of sea, sand and 70,000 pine trees. In 1927, it was declared one of the '100 landscapes of Japan'. Only one tree remained after the tsunami and can be seen in photographs of the disaster's aftermath. It is seen as a symbol of hope.

Two of the city's buildings that were wiped out by the



Folk painting of the tight-knit community of Rikuzentakata

tsunami were its museums, the Sea and Shell Museum and the Rikuzentakata City Museum. Five museum employees lost their lives that day and one has been declared missing. The museum structures were still standing after the tsunami, but windows, walls, ceilings, display cases and furnishings were either missing or damaged. Precious items from the museums' collections were either washed out of the buildings or buried in the mud left behind as the tsunami retreated.

Rescued from the debris at the Rikuzentakata City Museum after the disaster, the collections include oil paintings, pieces of the flora and fauna of the area, cultural property like ancient pottery (late Middle Jomon Period, 4000 BCE), folk dolls, ancient documents and books. It is estimated that there were more than 150,000 pieces in



Tsucchi, the 10-metre-long Baird's beaked whale

the City Museum's collection. Restoration of the varied items that were recovered is taking place in museums and universities throughout Japan. Two valuable paintings by renowned artist Genichiro Inokuma (1902-1993) have been sent out of Rikuzentakata to be rejuvenated by Japanese art restoration experts. At the temporary collections site on the outskirts of Rikuzentakata, delicate dried plant and insect specimens damaged by water and mud are being painstakingly repaired. Imagine what is involved in glueing insect legs back onto a tiny bug's body or fixing the broken neck of a taxidermied Ruddy Kingfisher. Amazingly, the city employees and volunteers working on behalf of the Sea and Shell Museum have managed to recover approximately one-half of its seashell collection.

Along with restoring collections, the cataloguing system is also being rebuilt. Formerly, the museums' collections were catalogued in digital files and in books. The plan going forward is to put records on a cloud computing system.

One of the most visible symbols salvaged from the destruction of the tsunami is a female whale. The 10-metre-long taxidermied Baird's beaked whale was housed in the Sea and Shell Museum near the coast. It is the largest taxidermied whale in Japan and was one of the main exhibits in the museum. The whale was nicknamed Tsucchi by local high-school students who conducted research on her. Tsucchi-kujira is the Japanese name for the Baird's beaked whale. Like the mural, Tsucchi was not washed out of the Sea and Shell Museum. However, she sustained extensive damage.

Six weeks after the devastating tsunami struck Rikuzentakata, museum staff and volunteers were working on the restoration of the whale. One may wonder, why try and save this whale? Why was it worth transporting Tsucchi to a facility 475 km away for reconstruction? The answer is that Tsucchi is an important object the community can use in a future museum. The whale's restoration has become symbolic of the rebuilding of the museums of Rikuzentakata. Likewise, the mural will be preserved so that in the future it can serve as a reminder of the rich cultural heritage inherent in this northern fishing and rice-farming community.



The lone pine tree, the only survivor from the forest of 70,000

As Masaru Kumagai, Chief Curator of the museums in Rikuzentakata stated, "No restoration of the community can take place without having a base of cultural entities to build on". A community needs its history and its memories. Kumagai asserts that the people of Rikuzentakata are justifiably proud of their local history and they must be encouraged to continue to feel this way.

The rebuilding process in the tsunami zone should include the local history and the collective identity in order to make the new city feel truly like home for the people of Rikuzentakata. At this point, it is unclear what the future will hold for the city, but it is certain that Rikuzentakata's cultural identity will be preserved, just like Tsucchi and the mural. The residents of Rikuzentakata ask that people overseas remember them as they determinedly commit themselves to the recovery process.

Dr. Lois Lydens is a member of FOM and is affiliated with the National Museum of Nature and Science in Tokyo, Japan.

All photos courtesy of Makoto Manabe