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From volunteers to voluntours: shifting priorities in post-disaster Japan

CHRIS MCMORRAN

Abstract: This paper analyses the emergence of post-disaster ‘voluntours’ following Japan’s 2011 disasters. An overwhelming, yet haphazard volunteer response to previous disasters spurred extensive collaboration between the state, relief organizations, and would-be volunteers in the wake of 3.11. However, when mapped onto the massive devastation of the 3.11 disasters, this collaboration almost immediately turned many post-disaster volunteers into ‘voluntourists’, a problematic category commonly associated with visitors from the Global North volunteering for social and environmental causes while on holiday in the Global South. Japan’s post-disaster voluntours demonstrate how uncoordinated and potentially risky volunteers have been channelled into a carefully-controlled and long-term response that satisfies people’s desire to help disaster victims, while ultimately encouraging tourism (sans volunteering) as the most desirable form of disaster recovery assistance. This shift toward voluntourism potentially undermines post-disaster volunteering and threatens to trap parts of Tōhoku, like other disaster sites, in a position of permanently ‘post-disaster’.

Keywords: disaster, volunteer, tourism, voluntourism, civil society, Japan

Introduction

‘Volunteering seems difficult. I’m worried because I have no experience. Anyway, I don’t even know how to apply…’ If this applies to you, you should join a ‘volunteer tour’ (borantia tsuā), where things like transport and accommodations are handled for you. Joining a tour is better than going on your own, since we can connect you with a local volunteer coordinator and mitigate issues like traffic congestion. Only available weekends? Want to add some sightseeing? You can choose from many options to suit your volunteer style, so don’t hesitate to join. Come volunteer. ‘Voluntour’ (boratsuā) in Tōhoku. (Tasukeai Japan 2015a)
When disaster strikes, whether in one’s neighbourhood or halfway around the world, people ask, ‘How can I help?’ Some answer by donating money, food, or clothing. For others, helping from a distance is not enough. They travel to the disaster zone and volunteer in relief and recovery activities. The Great Eastern Japan Disasters of 11 March 2011 spurred just such an outpouring of assistance. The 3.11 disasters left nearly 20,000 dead, destroyed or damaged hundreds of thousands of buildings, and forced the evacuation of over a million people to temporary and long-term shelters (National Police Agency 2015). In response, the Japanese Red Cross alone received more than 457 billion JPY, or roughly US$5 billion, in donations from within and beyond Japan (Japanese Red Cross Society 2015). Plus, in the first six months, over one million volunteers, mostly Japanese citizens, assisted in relief and recovery efforts in the three hardest-hit prefectures of Iwate, Miyagi, and Fukushima (Zenshakyo 2015). Volunteers cooked and served meals, shovelled drainage ditches, searched for keepsakes in mud-filled homes, and carried out countless other physically and emotionally demanding tasks. Over time, as construction firms and other experts took over the large-scale clean-up and rebuilding tasks, the number of volunteers steeply declined. However, the scale of the disasters and slow pace of recovery leave some still asking ‘How can I help?’ One option is to join a ‘voluntour’.

This paper analyses the emergence and implications of voluntours following Japan’s 3.11 disasters. This includes volunteer tourism packages explicitly labelled ‘voluntours’, like the one above, as well as the tendency of post-3.11 volunteering in general to resemble voluntours, by including elements commonly associated with leisure tourism, such as organized travel, repeat itineraries, and sightseeing. I begin by analysing the concept of the voluntour, which blurs the assumed conceptual boundaries between volunteering and tourism, particularly in a post-disaster setting. Then I explain how lessons from the 1995 Kobe Earthquake affected attitudes and laws toward volunteering in Japan, leading to an outpouring of volunteers and unprecedented collaboration between the Japanese government, local authorities, businesses, and NPOs following the 3.11 disasters. When mapped onto the extensive devastation of Tōhoku, this collaboration created a complex volunteer infrastructure that not only facilitated post-disaster volunteerism, but more problematically, circumscribed volunteers and essentially transformed them into voluntourists. This shift toward voluntourism suggests tourism (sans volunteering) is the most effective form of disaster recovery, potentially undermining the role of post-disaster civil society and threatening to trap parts of Tōhoku, like other disaster sites, in a permanently post-disaster position.

**Advocating armchair anthropology**

This paper is based on analysis of the websites of travel agencies and volunteer coordinating organizations, as well as the testimonials of disaster victims, volunteers, and voluntourists found online and in print. Notably, I have not travelled...
to Tōhoku since the 3.11 disasters, making me an ‘armchair anthropologist’ (Willerslev 2011), or more accurately, an armchair geographer. However, this frequently discredited category of scholar is poised for resurgence in an era when so much valuable information is available online. The 3.11 disasters in particular cast a long digital shadow in blogs, websites, social media feeds, and databases. Examples include websites from Kobe University’s ‘Tōhoku Volunteer Bus Project’ (2015), Peace Boat’s ‘Voices from the Ground’ (2012), and ‘Tasukeai Japan’ (2015), as well as more comprehensive online databases that feature maps, photographs, written testimonials, and video and audio files (often with transcripts) of survivor stories and volunteer activities, such as NHK’s ‘Great Eastern Japan Disasters Archive’ (2015a), Sophia University’s ‘Voices From Tōhoku’ (Suretā zemi 2014), and Harvard University’s ‘Digital Archives of Japan’s 2011 Disasters’ (2015). While I did not use all of these resources, their availability and accessibility has ushered in a new era of research, in which big (qualitative) data can be accessed and analysed from afar. This may reduce some of the ethical dilemmas and bodily risks associated with accessing all field-sites, and post-disaster landscapes in particular.

That said, my armchair does not preclude personal and professional connections to the massive disaster and recovery. I, too, watched news of the 2011 disasters in horror and wondered how I might help. Within days, I donated time and money to a student-led fundraising project and solicited donations outside the university library and door to door in administration buildings. In subsequent years I attended workshops and presentations to help me incorporate the disaster into teaching, and I tried to keep abreast of the ever-expanding scholarship on the topic. As Ted Bestor (2013) notes, a disaster of this scale not only impacts Japan in the short- and long-term, but also forces all who study Japan to reconsider what we thought we knew about Japan. Therefore, the 3.11 disasters continue to force personal and professional reflection on my discipline and my place in it.

I have wanted to travel to Tōhoku in order to help in the recovery efforts, hear the voices of survivors, witness the scale of the destruction and recovery, and reflect on what I thought I knew about Japan. However, I have been paralysed by the practical and ethical implications of being a potential nuisance who lacks local knowledge and a tourist gawking at human suffering and scarred landscapes. My paralysis has been compounded by two issues. First, I felt unease with the Japanese government’s quick creation of tours designed to use the bodies and words of my students to assure the world that Japan was safe for tourists and a model of disaster recovery. In June 2011, as Japanese citizens protested about the Kan administration’s mishandling of the disaster at the Fukushima Daiichi Power Plant and the slow overall recovery, the Embassy of Japan in Singapore announced the ‘Tōhoku Youth Ambassador Program’, a joint project between the Japanese Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Singapore, the Japan National Tourism Organization, and the Japanese government’s JENESYS Program. Nearly 100 Singaporean Youth Ambassadors were selected for a five-
day, all expense-paid trip to Tōhoku to take place in August, when they would tour affected areas, hear lectures from experts, and do volunteer work. In his send-off speech, Ambassador Suzuki explained,

You will mingle with Japanese students of your age, receive lectures and explanations from those dealing with the recovery and reconstruction, see for yourself how people are lifting their spirit through the organization of summer festivals, and have a glimpse of how we are trying to learn from the experience and mitigate the future shocks with application of latest technologies and science. (Embassy of Japan in Singapore 2011)

Participants were asked to report on their experiences on social media, such as Facebook and personal blogs. One student seemingly internalized the programme’s desired outcomes, posting on her personal blog 12 hours prior to departure,

Instead of leisurely sightseeing and going around at my own pace and own time, I will be going as a youth ambassador; to show support for the people of Tōhoku through volunteer work and interaction with their local university students; in hopes to strengthen bonds between Japan and Singapore, and to show friends and family that Tōhoku is ‘back to normal’ and safe to visit’. (Karisa 2011)

This itinerary and the student’s reaction echoed emerging work in critical development studies and tourism studies on volunteer tourism, or voluntourism. Like all voluntours, the inclusion of volunteer activities claimed to raise the trip above ‘leisurely sightseeing’. However, it also problematically enrolled students in a form of soft-power diplomacy that uses tragedy to pull at heartstrings and foster ground-up support for the victims, in this case at the scale of the entire nation. I was asked to promote the programme to my students, despite being unable to vouch for its safety and feeling concerned that they might become props in a game of regional political and economic significance. Equal parts study tour, cultural exchange programme, volunteer opportunity, shopping trip, and press junket, the programme propelled me to investigate the origins and implications of other voluntours to Tōhoku.

The second factor keeping me away from Tōhoku is my existing relationship with several communities in rural Kyūshū, where I have studied since 2001 and taken students every year since May 2011. In the years since the 3.11 disasters, individuals both inside and outside the academy have questioned my failure to visit or lead students to Tōhoku instead, where they suggest we would do more ‘good’. I reject this calculus. Without local contacts, prior knowledge, or clear learning objectives in Tōhoku, I cannot justify abandoning my existing field sites, regardless of the potential theoretical, methodological, and empirical insights to be gained elsewhere. This paper is thus an effort to respond to critics and to demonstrate how one might study a disaster from afar.
Voluntourism: doing good on vacation

Invitations to ‘voluntour in Tōhoku’ accompany global growth in ‘doing good’ while on vacation. Travelling away from home to assist with development projects or in the wake of natural or man-made disasters is not new. It has roots in missionary activity, colonialism, and exploration, as well as international development aimed at solving social and environmental problems (Smith and Laurie 2011). However, over the past two decades, there has been an expansion in the number of people who volunteer while on holiday, the packaging of such experiences, and scholarship on this phenomenon, widely known as volunteer tourism, or voluntourism (Sin et al. 2015). Voluntours in post-3.11 Japan provide valuable new insights to the study of voluntourism.

Voluntourism is a linguistic mash-up that blends the seemingly-contradictory motivations and practices of volunteering and tourism. Volunteering is considered the selfless exertion of physical and emotional effort to help others, without expectation of payment or reward beyond personal satisfaction. Tourism involves temporary travel away from home for largely selfish reasons such as relaxation, sightseeing, education, or shopping. The assumed split between ‘volunteering as selfless effort’ and ‘tourism as selfish leisure’ further widens in a post-disaster setting (Table 1). Post-disaster volunteers are seen as selflessly rushing to the scene, even risking personal injury, to aid in the relief and recovery effort, in the model of disaster relief organizations such as Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) or the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

Post-disaster tourists, on the other hand, are commonly seen as motivated not by a desire to assist, but to witness the destruction. Post-disaster tourism (or ‘disaster tourism’) is often linked to ‘thanatourism’ (Seaton 1999) and other forms of ‘dark tourism’ (Stone and Sharpley 2008) that have been criticized,

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<th>Post-disaster</th>
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<td>Motivations</td>
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<td>possible personal connection to area and/or survivors</td>
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<td>aims to assist survivors, return their lives to normal</td>
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<td>desires to feel solidarity with survivors and learn from them</td>
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<td>Practices</td>
<td>searching for survivors</td>
<td>touring disaster zone</td>
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<td></td>
<td>caring for survivors’ immediate needs (medical, food, water, clothing, housing)</td>
<td>visiting and photographing survivors and disaster monuments (i.e. destroyed buildings)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>helping with recovery efforts (cleaning rubble, rebuilding homes, etc.)</td>
<td>collecting souvenirs (rubble, other disaster symbols)</td>
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<td>listening to survivors’ stories</td>
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especially by disaster victims, as voyeuristically touring death and devastation (see also Kingston 2016). For instance, when the Gray Line bus company began offering ‘Katrina tours’ through damaged New Orleans neighbourhoods just months after the 2005 hurricane, residents complained the tours were exploitative and voyeuristic (Pezzullo 2009). Moreover, post-disaster tourists are often seen as disrupting the recovery process, a problem Gennifer Weisenfeld (2012, p. 72) dates in Japan to at least the 1923 Great Kantō Earthquake, when sightseers ‘became an impediment to reconstruction, and people were encouraged not to enter the city unless they had an absolute necessity to do so.’

Voluntourism bridges the gap between ‘selfless effort’ and ‘selfish leisure’, denoting organized holidays that involve ‘aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments, or research into aspects of society or environment’ (Wearing 2001, p. 1). Of course, the level of involvement can vary greatly, creating a continuum of people who may be considered voluntourists. At one end of the spectrum are individuals whose primary motivation for travel is to volunteer, with little emphasis on touring the locale. At the other end are people who add a few hours of volunteering to an otherwise busy schedule of leisure activities, for instance, squeezing two hours of soccer with orphans between temple visits and souvenir shopping. The result blurs the boundaries between volunteering and tourism in a way that resonates with a growing number of travellers around the world, yet worries some observers (Lyons and Wearing 2008, MacKinnon 2009).

This is partly due to voluntourism’s common association with travellers from the Global North building schools or homes, teaching English in orphanages, or aiding research projects on endangered species while on holiday in the Global South (Sin et al. 2015). Incidentally, while most studies of voluntourism focus on North Americans, Europeans, or Australians voluntouring in less-developed regions, Japanese also voluntour abroad. For instance, Japanese travel industry giants H.I.S. and Diamond-Big Co., publisher of the popular ‘Chikyū no arukikata’ guidebook series, regularly offer voluntour packages, such as an eight-day trip to India, which includes the Taj Mahal and a ‘slum visit’ (suramu hōmon); an eight-day tour to the Philippines, with shopping and an ‘outing with street children’ (sutorī chirudoren o ensoku); or an eight-day package to Cambodia that includes Angkor Wat and farm work with land-mine victims (H.I.S. 2015, Chikyū no arukikata no tabi 2015). Such voluntours not only demonstrate the blended motivations and practices of participants, but also hint at common critiques of voluntourism.

Voluntourism proponents argue it can create a sustainable and alternative form of travel with economic and social benefits to both host communities and voluntourists via increased intercultural awareness (McGehee and Santos 2005, Palacios 2010) and greater interest and participation in civil society by voluntourists (McGehee 2002, Devereux 2008, Howes 2008). Critics, on the other hand, question the effectiveness of programmes that are, by their nature, short-term,
mostly involve non-experts, and often seem to benefit the consciences and social media feeds of participants, not to mention the intermediary travel businesses that arrange such opportunities, more than the disadvantaged individuals or endangered animals the voluntours claim to assist (Mostafanezhad 2014). Voluntourism is also seen as part of a broader rolling back of the state, in which developmental objectives such as income generation and capacity building are turned over to market and non-governmental actors in less-developed countries (Roy 2012, Kapoor 2013). As development, aid, and social services become privatized and commercialized into voluntours accessible to individuals (often from the Global North), development itself becomes depoliticized and reimagined as a challenge for individuals – not states – to solve (Mostafanezhad 2014). Finally, the movement of voluntourists from the Global North to South perpetuates a neocolonial relationship in which the latter appears permanently backwards and therefore, in need of assistance from the former.

Post-disaster voluntours, and specifically those in post-3.11 Japan, build upon and complicate these studies in important ways. First, despite common praise of post-disaster volunteers and disdain for post-disaster tourists, the assumed boundaries between their motivations and practices often break down in a disaster setting. Even the most altruistic volunteer may also wish to tour the destruction and take ‘selfies’ with survivors, just as the most voyeuristic tourist may support disaster recovery through their spending or be moved by survivors’ tales they later share back home. As Pezzullo (2009, p. 100) notes in the case of Katrina tours, ‘Touring extreme calamity also offers opportunities for education, civic identification, and cultural change.’ Indeed, tourism boosters in Hiroshima and Minamata argue that visitors, particularly students on school excursions, will learn valuable lessons about nuclear non-proliferation or environmental stewardship, respectively, through visiting their disaster sites. Plus, although disaster tourism (and voluntourism) may seem ‘dark’, it may provide an avenue for ‘hope’, as locals share stories of survival and perseverance with visitors (and each other) and thus contribute to a ground-up form of community reconstruction (fukkō). As one disaster storyteller (kataribe) profiled in NHK’s ‘Great Eastern Japan Disasters Archive’ explains, calling it ‘dark tourism’ sounds bad, especially since he is motivated by hope. He declares, ‘It’s “hope tourism”’ (NHK 2015b).

Next, the state’s early role in developing voluntours following the 3.11 disasters, which I describe below, demonstrates its continued strong hand in managing (and circumscribing) civil society’s response to all disasters (cf. Pekkanen 2000). In other words, the case of Japan shows that voluntourism cannot be only seen as another example of the neoliberal rollback of the state. The state may appear to be stepping aside by enabling volunteering, but it indirectly maintains control over the mobility of volunteers and forms of volunteering, particularly following disasters, by encouraging all volunteers to work with non-profit organizations (NPOs), which rely on the state for legal recognition, and in some cases, funding.
Finally, the case of Japan disrupts the typical image of the voluntourist as a privileged person from the First World travelling to and volunteering in a deprived Third World destination. Most post-3.11 volunteers and voluntourists were Japanese, thus avoiding the usual race- and nationality-based critiques of voluntourism (Mostafanezhad 2014, MacKinnon 2009). At the same time, the Tōhoku region’s structural inequalities vis-à-vis Tokyo, which in the past compelled residents to take drastic steps such as selling daughters into bondage as prostitutes or accepting nuclear reactors to offset economic decline, were magnified by the 3.11 disasters and are likely to continue despite the injection of vast sums for rebuilding efforts (Oguma 2011, Aldrich 2016). Hundreds of thousands of residents lost their homes and possessions, with little hope of ever returning to a pre-disaster normal. Thus, Tōhoku voluntourism mirrors the standard voluntour movement of wealthy, privileged, and mobile individuals to locations where they assist those seen as permanently poor(er), needing aid, and stuck in place. In turn, affected communities with few other economic options face the choice of whether to develop post-disaster tourism, which means adopting a post-disaster local identity perpetually in need of assistance from elsewhere.

**From Kobe to Tōhoku: normalizing and managing post-disaster volunteers**

Tōhoku voluntours are a product of the state’s dual realignment with volunteers following past disasters, particularly the 1995 Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake (or Kobe Earthquake), Japan’s largest disaster in recent memory. Through this experience, the state learned that post-disaster volunteers needed to be both allowed to assist and carefully managed. Bureaucratic red tape and poor coordination between authorities slowed aid following the Kobe disaster (Edgington 2010, Avenell 2012). This haphazard response by the state, coupled with early media reports of volunteers filling the relief gap, spurred waves of volunteers to travel to Kobe and surrounding areas. It was not the first time in Japan that volunteers aided following a disaster, but the response was so massive in scale and significance that it normalized volunteering in Japan. According to Simon Avenell (2012, p. 55), the response to Kobe ‘transformed the image of volunteering from obscure activity by an exclusive group of altruists to something ordinary people could easily participate in’ (cf. Toivonen 2013). 1995 was soon referred to as *Borantia Gannen*, or ‘Year One of the Volunteer Age’. The Kobe response both legitimized and expanded civil society through increased cooperation with government, in part through the passage of laws like the 1998 Special Nonprofit Activities Law, or NPO Law, which relaxed requirements for NPOs and led to their proliferation, ‘allow(ing) thousands of new civil-society groups to participate more actively in Japanese life’ and giving them ‘unprecedented freedom from the heavy-handed bureaucratic supervision that has plagued civil-society
organizations in a nation often characterized as a “strong state” (Pekkanen 2000, p. 112).

At the same time, the volunteer response to the Kobe disaster revealed that post-disaster volunteers need to be managed. The sudden arrival of ‘unsolicited volunteers’ (oshikake no borantia) surprised authorities working in and around Kobe, who worried they might become ‘nuisance volunteers’ (meiwaku borantia) or even ‘refugee volunteers’ (nanmin borantia) who would burden damaged infrastructure and consume aid intended for disaster victims. As Avenell (2012, p. 60) explains,

> Individual acts of spontaneous altruism made for good news copy, but volunteer experts in government and civil society became convinced that, for disaster volunteering to be effective, it had to be channeled through a mature and highly integrated voluntary infrastructure based on volunteer centers, registrations, training, and experienced coordinators.

In other words, while the 1995 Kobe disaster response normalized volunteering in Japan, it also highlighted the need for its careful management.

The state’s dual realignment with volunteers was visible within days of the disasters of 11 March 2011, with the state discouraging independent volunteers and simultaneously creating a clearinghouse for volunteer opportunities. The state sought to manage volunteer numbers and their mobility in part due to the scale of the devastation. Roads, railways, and seaports had been severely damaged, and a scarcity of accommodations and other essentials meant an onslaught of uncoordinated volunteers might interfere with relief and recovery efforts, or worse, add to the ranks of those in need of assistance. In addition, there were legitimate safety and health concerns associated with working in disaster zones characterized by a dangerous mix of mud, glass, oil, and other toxic materials, not to mention the invisible dangers of radiation in parts of Fukushima Prefecture. Potential volunteers were warned of these dangers and discouraged from rushing to affected areas without first coordinating their movements with disaster relief organizations working on the ground.

The state quickly stepped in to foster such coordination. On 12 March, Prime Minister Kan Naoto appointed a special aide for disaster volunteering, as well as a director of a new Cabinet Secretariat’s Volunteer Coordination Office (Naikaku Kanbo Shinsai Borantia Renrakushitsu, or VCO). Ten days later, the VCO launched the ‘Tasukeai Japan’ website, a ‘3.11 Reconstruction Aid Information Portal’ (3.11 fukko shien jōhō saito) designed to connect would-be volunteers with Volunteer Coordinators (VCs) directing disaster relief projects (Tasukeai Japan 2015b, Avenell 2012). These VCs included organizations with decades of post-disaster experience, such as the National Council on Social Welfare (Zenshakyo) and Peace Boat, as well as NPOs founded soon after 11 March 2011. Examples of the latter include organizations coordinating volunteers in particular locations, such as Tōno Magokoro Net, an NPO based in Tōno City, Iwate Prefecture (Tōno Magokoro Net 2015), as well as groups targeting particular segments of the population, such as
‘Youth for 3.11’ and the Kobe University Tōhoku Volunteer Bus Project, which both encouraged volunteering among university students (Kobe Daigaku Tōhoku Borantiabasu Purojekuto 2015; Youth for 3.11 2015).

In some cases, the Tasukeai Japan platform enabled collaboration between VCs; for instance, enabling VCs based in cities such as Tokyo to dispatch volunteers to VCs based in affected areas. For example, Youth for 3.11 provided orientation and safety training for recruits who were then bussed to Ishinomaki, Miyagi Prefecture, to join Peace Boat’s *Ima Koko Purojekuto* (lit. The Here Now Project), which involved working and living for a week with residents in order to ‘break the wall between victim and relief worker’ (*hisaisha-shiensha to iu kabe o koete*) (Youth for 3.11 2014). Similarly, since April 2011 the Kobe University Tōhoku Volunteer Bus Project (called the *borabasu*) has dispatched volunteers to projects operated by Tōno Magokoro Net, where students initially did physical labour such as cleaning debris, but later shifted to ‘care of the heart’ (*kokoro no kea*), such as providing foot baths and doing handicrafts with disaster refugees (Kobe Daigaku Tōhoku Borantiabasu Purojekuto 2016).

By linking would-be volunteers to VCs through the Tasukeai Japan website, the state supported civil society’s will to volunteer, while also managing the flow of volunteers into and around affected areas. Each volunteer experience was packaged. VCs managed the logistics of volunteering, by putting people to work where it was needed, as well as transportation, accommodation, food, and other needs that grow in significance in a post-disaster landscape where hotels, restaurants, and even convenience stores may have been destroyed. Visitors to the Tasukeai Japan website found brief descriptions of volunteer opportunities around the affected area, as well as a link to the VC in charge of each programme with additional information. Descriptions included travel dates and pick-up locations, availability and type of accommodation, planned tasks, the time and location of mandatory pre-departure orientations, and the all-inclusive cost of participation. In other words, the webpages of Tasukeai Japan and similar organizations, such as Zenshakyo, resembled those of travel agencies, linking customers differentiated by desired destination, time commitment, and level of participation to volunteer packages with catchy names repeated for months or years.

These websites also warned visitors of the dangers facing them and the importance of being prepared. Volunteers needed volunteer insurance (with links to providers embedded in the VC’s information page) and an array of equipment, including a mask, gloves, long-sleeved trousers and shirts, a hat or helmet, a towel, and tall rubber boots or steel-soled boots, depending on the work site (see Figure 1). When Anne Allison volunteered in July 2011 with Peace Boat in Ishinomaki, she needed to provide ‘all my own food, bottled water, and sleeping and work gear (a job that took me literally days to prepare for in Tokyo)’ (Allison 2013, p. 190). These hurdles to participation likely dissuaded some would-be volunteers, while many participants found themselves in a protective bubble from the moment they boarded a coach in Tokyo, for example, to the moment they returned home.
Figure 1 Disaster volunteer uniform (Source: Rescue Stock Yard, n.d.). Used with permission.
Volunteering in a bubble: unintentional voluntourists

The bubble surrounding post-3.11 volunteers reached beyond their protective clothing in ways that blended volunteering and tourism and turned many volunteers into unintentional voluntourists. One particularly clear instance of this can be seen in ‘inspection tours of devastated areas’ (hisaichi no shisatsu tsuā), which were part of many volunteer itineraries and included visits to ‘disaster monuments’. News of the 3.11 disasters repeatedly showed the power of nature and the vastness of the destruction, leading NPOs and volunteers to share what Mehl (2012) acknowledged was a ‘a tacit understanding that one of the motives for volunteering in Tōhoku was the volunteers’ desire to see the scene of the great disaster for themselves.’ In addition to volunteering their time and energy to the relief and recovery efforts, volunteers wanted to witness the mountains of debris and curiosities such as the passenger ferry stranded atop a building in Ōtsuchi town, Iwate Prefecture (Figure 2), or the so-called ‘miracle pine’ (kiseki no ippon matsu) of Rikuzentakata, the sole survivor of a forest of 70,000 trees that once stretched along the coast before being washed away by the tsunami (Rikuzentakata City 2015a) (Figure 3).

Such disaster monuments, and others like them, became established and expected stops on the itineraries of volunteers – the Ōtsuchi and Rikuzentakata

Figure 2 Boat on building, Akahama, Ōtsuchi-cho, Iwate Pref. (Source: The Guardian, 2011). Used with permission of Guardian News & Media Ltd.
equivalents of the Eiffel Tower. In some cases, they even remained on the itinerary after the monument was gone, such as when the Ōtsuchi ferry was removed due to concerns about the structural integrity of the building beneath. As noted by Mehl (2012), volunteers continued to visit the site, where a photograph of the stranded boat was posted next to flowerbeds built by other volunteers. The ‘miracle pine’ proved even more valuable to the post-disaster landscape as a symbol of local and national resilience. In May 2012, when efforts to keep it alive failed, the city raised over one million US dollars to cut it down, treat the wood, and reassemble a replica, which was completed in July 2013 (Rikuzentakata City 2015a). Throughout, the tree regularly drew volunteers/tourists searching for symbols of hope amid the devastation.

Inspection tours recall much-maligned examples of disaster tourism such as that found in post-Katrina New Orleans, with volunteers transforming into sightseers passively gliding past the devastation. In describing her own inspection tour of Rikuzentakata, Iwate Prefecture, which followed several days of ‘light’ volunteer work with Tōno Magokoro Net, Margaret Mehl (2012) hints at the awkward convergence of volunteering and tourism that emerged during her inspection tour:

Walking across the wasteland; the sheer expanse surpassed anything I had seen so far, as I came across a tour coach parked beside the coastal road. A stream
of people, many with cameras, crossed the road and walked towards the sea, disregarding a notice prohibiting access to the area. … ‘Are they all tourists?’ I asked a couple who had addressed me. They seemed faintly embarrassed at my question. ‘Most of them are probably volunteers,’ I was told. This may well be true […], after all I too was a volunteer of sorts… What reason had I to be there, apart from wishing to see for myself the town I had heard so much about?

For Mehl, this inspection tour felt dangerously like ‘disaster tourism’, which she calls ‘an ugly expression, suggesting inconsiderate sightseers satisfying their curiosity and in the worst case hindering rescue work or exploiting the victims’ (Mehl 2012). She continues, ‘But, as so often, reality is complex.’ Indeed, the reality in post-3.11 Tōhoku was that many volunteers also had motivations commonly associated with tourism. The bubble of organization that emerged to enable and manage post-disaster volunteers also satisfied volunteers’ desires to witness the destruction for themselves. As months passed and this blend of volunteering and tourism became more accepted and routine, the state helped create and promote a more explicit form of packaged civil society response to disaster, through official ‘voluntours’.

**Birth of the voluntour**

The Kan Cabinet first proposed ‘volunteer tourism’ (borantia+kankō) as a way to aid the Tōhoku recovery in May 2011 (Ministry of Land Infrastructure Transport and Tourism 2011a). This brought its meaning in line with its use outside Japan and brought it into everyday use.¹³ Prior to 2011 ‘volunteer tourism’ (borantia tsūrizumu) in Japan referred to short-term overseas working holidays and the WWOOF (Willing Workers on Organic Farms) programme, in which participants motivated by a desire to travel around the country or overseas worked not for pay, but in exchange for meals and lodging (Yoda 2011, Nakamura et al. 2008). Post-3.11 volunteer tours (borantia tsuā), on the other hand, were ‘tie-ups combining volunteer activities and regional tourism promotion’ (borantiaakatsudō to chiikikanšōshinkō o tai’appu) that would deliver volunteers from places such as Tokyo to villages affected by the 3.11 disasters and home again (Ministry of Land Infrastructure Transport and Tourism 2011a).

Organized by JTB Kantō, the first borabasu (‘volunteer bus’) departed Tokyo late on the night of 27 May 2011 and included a three-day itinerary. Participants slept aboard the bus. The group included two leaders of Tasukeai Japan, Ishikawa Junya and Satō Nao (2011), who shared the experience through social media. By referring to them as ‘volunteer tours’ (borantia tsuā), organizers recognized people’s complex motivations for travelling to Tōhoku (both concern and curiosity), while also understanding the importance of minimizing the preparations and risks that accompanied other volunteer options. The voluntour was a
way for these people to finally contribute through their physical presence in Tōhoku. Voluntours became a separate category on the Tasukeai Japan website, promising participants they would contribute to the region’s recovery and witness the extent of the destruction without feeling like a nuisance.

Like the numerous volunteer opportunities listed on the Tasukeai Japan website, the bubble of protection and the integration of volunteering and tourism were understood; however, these ‘volunteer tours’ explicitly advertised their touristic elements, such as sightseeing and shopping. As early as June 2011, six companies were offering post-disaster voluntours on the Tasukeai Japan website: Kinki Tourist, JTB Kantō, Diamond Big/Top Tour, Nippon Kankō, Kimura Kankō Basu, and Iwate Kenkoku Kankō (Ministry of Land Infrastructure Transport and Tourism 2011a). Some voluntours ran repeatedly, and each one involved collaboration between the state, business, and NPOs for its development, advertisement, and completion. For instance, JTB Kantō’s ‘JTB Green Shoes Project – Volunteer Bus Pack in Miyagi’, a two-day, one-night package offered ten times from June to August of 2011, included volunteer activities such as clearing mud and assisting at a temporary housing centre, as well as tourist activities such as shopping and tasting local delicacies (Ministry of Land Infrastructure Transport and Tourism 2011b). In addition to providing opportunities for individuals to participate in the relief and recovery efforts, the first voluntours also enabled the travel industry to join what in past disasters had been largely the sphere of civil society.

Five years after the disasters, multiple organizations continue to explicitly suggest ‘voluntours’ as an option for helping the Tōhoku region in its long road to recovery, including Fukushima Travel and JTB. Indeed, the suggestion to ‘volunteer in Tōhoku’ remains on the Tasukeai Japan website, which reassures visitors that ‘Joining a tour is better than going on your own, since we can connect you with a local volunteer coordinator and mitigate issues like traffic congestion.’ It combines the best of volunteering and tourism, packaging a volunteer experience with weekend sightseeing. However, the post-disaster focus has gradually moved away from volunteering, toward tourism as the best method to assist with Tōhoku’s recovery.

**From voluntourist to tourist**

The final step in managing post-disaster volunteers is asking them to skip volunteering altogether. Instead, they should be tourists. This impetus comes from many directions, from NPOs and private business to local governments and individual entrepreneurs. For instance, the Tasukeai Japan (2015c) website suggests ‘support through travel’ (tabishite ōen) as a way to help with the ongoing reconstruction efforts: ‘Go there, feel the land, enjoy the hot springs and the delicious food. Purchase gifts and tell your friends about your trip when you get home.’ The website suggests that in addition to volunteering, donating to NPOs, and
purchasing products from impacted areas, one should consider joining ‘support
tours’ (den tsuā), in which one can boost the economic and social revitalization of
the region through activities like ‘visiting a town with a local guide, attending a
session on reconstruction efforts, and visiting shops that have reopened’ (Japan
2015c). Fukushima Prefecture’s Disaster Volunteer Center (2015) similarly
encourages a shift from volunteering (or voluntouring) to tourism. Visitors to the
website immediately see four pieces of advice. The first three discuss volunteer-
ing, but emphasize hurdles such as the difficulty of organizing projects on your
own, the need to communicate with volunteer coordinators before going, and the
required tools and preparations (similar to the requirements above), such as
knowledge of its ‘water damage volunteer work manual’ (suigai borantia saga
manyaru). The simplest advice is the fourth and final item: ‘You can also aid
the disaster areas through tourism and by purchasing local products – as volun-
teer activities in the disaster areas change, tourism and purchase of local products
is another welcome form of aiding in the restoration of disaster areas’ (Fukush-
ima Prefecture’s Disaster Volunteer Center 2015).

In the private sector, JR East has catered to people’s continued desire to help
by developing ‘reconstruction support tours’ (fukko den tsuā) in Iwate and Miyagi
prefectures, highlighted in a 12-page brochure published in late 2015 (Figure 4)
(East Japan Railway Company 2015). One tour to Minamisanriku and Kesen-
uma, Miyagi Prefecture, suggests participants can ‘support reconstruction by
purchasing goods in lively shopping streets’. This tour also includes 50-minute
talks by disaster survivors (kataribe) in both towns. Another package in Iwate
includes a 90-minute guided tour of the Miracle Pine by a local survivor and a
visit to Goishikaigan Resthouse, where tourists can eat local delicacies and pur-
chase ‘local handicrafts’ (jimoto no mingeihin). Volunteering is notably absent
from these programmes. However, their designation as ‘support tours’ and
‘reconstruction support tours’ acknowledges people’s continued desire to help
with the recovery and learn from the disasters.

Municipalities also play a role in developing (or not) post-disaster tourism,
with broad implications for the community’s economic and social future. For
instance, Rikuzentakata, home of the Miracle Pine, encourages visitors, even
those who do not volunteer. In a video on the city’s official homepage, Mayor
Futoshi Toba, stands in front of a vast wasteland that used to be home to over
24,000 people. He entreats visitors from Japan and overseas to see the disaster
area ‘with their own eyes’, shop in the handful of stores now open, and share their
experience with others (Rikuzentakata City, n.d.). The city is also trying to
develop educational tours. For instance, the city recently invited a travel profes-
sional based in Singapore to visit and offer advice to make the city more attractive
to schools, particularly overseas. As she explained to me, Rikuzentakata is simul-
taneously rebuilding and ‘rebranding’ the city as a site that teaches the power of
natural disasters to not only destroy landscapes, but also to build connections
within and beyond communities (M. Minagawa, personal communication,
Figure 4 East Japan Railway Company’s Reconstruction Support Tours (Source: East Japan Railway Company 2015). Used with permission.
3 October 2016). The city envisions a hopeful future will emerge from its tragic past. As the English explanation to ‘our friends overseas’ that accompanies the Mayor’s video concludes, ‘We do not want to be forgotten. This is our hope’ (Rikuzentakata City, n.d.). On whose terms the disaster will be remembered and how effective tourism will be as an economic and social tool in Rikuzentakata and elsewhere remain to be seen, but they raise questions about how and when volunteering ceases to be a desired and effective response to disaster, as well as how the post-disaster identity is negotiated.

Conclusions: post-disaster civil society and place identity

This paper claims that the collaborative volunteer infrastructure that emerged after the 3.11 disasters both enabled volunteering and circumscribed it in significant ways, quickly giving the impression that voluntours were preferable to volunteers as a disaster response. The infrastructure connected would-be volunteers with volunteer coordinators, but it discouraged many potential volunteers with serious warnings about safety and preparation. It also encouraged a carefully managed form of volunteering that first resembled, then explicitly encouraged, voluntourism. The line between volunteer and tourist blurs in the post-disaster landscape due to volunteers’ multiple motivations and practices, as well as the need for some coordination of the volunteer effort. However, the shift toward voluntourism, and ultimately tourism, raises questions about the role of civil society following a disaster and the implications of the post-disaster designation.

The shift toward voluntourism threatens to limit the independent disaster response by civil society. As the collaborative post-3.11 volunteer infrastructure emerged, critics raised concerns about the state’s role in both discouraging and excessively managing volunteers. In April 2011, disaster recovery expert Murosaki Yoshiteru questioned continued discussions about unprepared volunteers and nuisance volunteers, explaining that the massive scale of the Tōhoku disaster necessitated a massive volunteer effort unhindered by such concerns (Murosaki 2011). Similarly, Imase Masashi, director of the NPO Civic Action Clearing House, wondered why Tōhoku volunteers had to be trained and coordinated, arguing ‘talk of “nuisance volunteers” will only hamper individual spontaneity’ (Avenell 2012, p. 71). For Avenell, the ‘organized or “packaged” volunteer buses and volunteer tours, registrations, homepage updates, training, and “pre-briefings”’ following 3.11 had a ‘systematizing impact on volunteering’ (2012, p. 66). The state’s powerful role in systematizing volunteering discouraged certain kinds of volunteers while enabling others. The state also wielded the power to recognize NPOs established after the disasters, which impacted their ability to raise money. Such reliance on the state potentially limits relief activities NPOs engage in, particularly those that undermine state authority or highlight the state’s failures in mitigating the disaster in the first place.
Civil society’s potential response to disaster is also limited by the layers of intermediaries, including the state, NPOs, and travel companies, who collaboratively determined the form, timing, and location of volunteering, as well as who volunteers met along the way. The shift toward voluntouring as a model for assistance makes volunteering less frequently a spontaneous act negotiated between a volunteer and a disaster victim. Instead, intermediaries pre-arrange volunteer work, meetings with disaster victims, and visits to disaster monuments that are intended to satisfy volunteers/customers. Over time, successful itineraries become so routine they limit participants’ ability to explore locations or hear voices that may criticize the organizers, the state, the rebuilding efforts, or the volunteers themselves (McMorran 2015).

The shift toward voluntours also alters the nature of volunteering, since it is mediated by a financial transaction. Voluntourists pay for the privilege to visit and volunteer in a particular location, and they expect something in return, such as bus tours and walking tours around the disaster zone, encounters with storytelling survivors (kataribe), opportunities to leave their mark on the landscape and its residents, and the chance to try local cuisine. This contradicts what David Slater (2013) calls the ‘free gifting’ most people associate with volunteering. In his moving analysis of volunteering after the 3.11 disasters, Slater notes how normal, pre-disaster networks of reciprocity were disrupted not only by the 3.11 disasters, but also by volunteers who wanted to assist with no strings attached. As Slater explains, for many volunteers ‘even the expectation of a return can compromise the moral purity of voluntary assistance’ (Slater 2013, p. 270). Voluntours allow participants to bypass the complex and locally-specific geographies of reciprocity that characterize all communities, but they contaminate the purity of volunteering by commodifying participation in civil society. Indeed, the shift toward voluntourism suggests that tourism is the best way to show that one cares following a disaster, thus devaluing civil society altogether. Moreover, just as voluntourism in general depoliticizes poverty and other social and environmental issues by making them the focus of a commodified personal encounter, the move toward voluntourism in post-disaster Tōhoku threatens to depoliticize the long-standing structural inequalities that impacted the region’s vulnerabilities to disaster. When civil society’s disaster response is individualized, commodified, and packaged, there is less chance for it to collectively counterbalance other political forces in society.

Finally, the shift toward voluntourism and subsequent ‘support tours’ raises questions about the implications of being permanently designated ‘post-disaster’. Elsewhere in disaster studies, Gregory Bankoff (2001) showed how the concept of ‘vulnerability’ has allowed the West to frame some parts of the world permanently vulnerable to disasters, and thus constantly in need of Western expertise. Voluntourism works in similar ways. Voluntours in Southeast Asia, for example, frame the region as permanently lacking and thus in need of development money and expertise from the Global North. Post-disaster voluntourism threatens to
play on and perpetuate a similar permanent relationship between the rest of Japan and those places marked as permanently post-3.11. Just as one struggles to mark the end of any era designated ‘post-’ (e.g. post-war), when does the ‘post-disaster’ end (Gordon 1993)? Places such as Hiroshima seem destined to be forever post-disaster, although the designation depends on how the disaster is imagined, remembered, depicted, commodified, experienced, and consumed by locals and outsiders (Selden and Selden 1989, Yoneyama 1999). Similarly, Minamata seems unlikely to escape its association with the methyl-mercury poisoning first discovered in the 1950s that bears its name. The disaster will impact residents and visitors long after the last Minamata Disease patient passes away. In fact, local NPOs and the city government collaborate on tourism initiatives so others, particularly school children, can learn from its disastrous past. Just as those selling voluntourism in Southeast Asia have a stake in framing the region as permanently in need of assistance from the Global North, those deriving educational, economic, emotional, and political value from a ‘post-disaster’ designation may continue to maintain this distinction long into the future. Six years after the 3.11 disasters, this can be seen in places such as Rikuzentakata, which have retained or created disaster monuments or other memorials that can draw curious visitors in perpetuity. Will these communities ever emerge from the shadow of the disaster, especially if government officials and tourism boosters continue to build an identity around this designation? And what role will civil society play in accepting or rejecting such an identity?

Whether or not the affected Tōhoku communities continue to be imagined ‘post-disaster’ in the years to come, and what role voluntourism, and ultimately tourism, plays in their recovery remain to be seen. However, as the case of Japan shows, voluntourism should be taken seriously following all disasters. As more people around the world are inspired to ‘do something’ to aid with disaster relief, governments, NPOs, businesses, and individuals must contend with the short- and long-term impacts and implications of voluntourism on relief efforts, economic recovery, regional identity, and the very nature of civil society following a disaster.

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Notes

1. All translations by the author.
2. The Great Eastern Japan Disasters (Higashi Nihon Daishinsai) refers to the magnitude 9.1 earthquake and tsunami that devastated communities along the coast of Northeastern Japan on 11 March 2011. The tsunami also knocked out the primary and back-up cooling systems of Tokyo Electric Power Company’s Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant, leading to a partial meltdown of several reactors. This combination of disasters has variously been called the ‘Tohoku disaster,’ the ‘triple disaster,’ the ‘3.11 disasters,’ or simply ‘3.11.’ I use the latter two in this paper.
3. This includes 60 billion JPY donated by Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies around the world, 40 billion JPY in oil revenues donated by Kuwait, and 357 billion JPY donated domestically. This also includes over US$40,000 raised by my students, whose deep emotional ties to Japan through coursework, time spent studying or travelling in Japan, and love of Japanese food and popular culture spurred them to action.
4. According to the Japan National Council of Social Welfare (Zenkoku shakaifukushi kyōgikai, or Zenkyashō), the three hardest-hit prefectures received a combined total of more than 100,000 volunteers each month from April to August of 2011. The greatest number came in May 2011, with 182,400. The combined number of volunteers exceeded 1.4 million by 31 January 2015. See Zenshakyo (2015).
5. These activities and their changing nature can be found in reports by organizations such as the Higashi Nihon Daishinsai Saigai Borantia Sentā (2015) and Zenshakyo (2013), as well as on blogs and in print in Japanese, English, and other languages. See Slater (2013) and Allison (2013).
6. Global North and Global South appear in development studies, tourism studies, geography, and cognate disciplines to refer to wealthy, developed nations and poorer, developing nations, respectively. The terms emerged to replace designations such as First/Second/Third World nations and developed/developing nations, although they are not unproblematic. See Hollington, et al. (2015).
7. While I have not travelled to Tohoku since 3.11, I have led students to Minamata (five times) and Hiroshima.
8. In March 2012, the Tasukeai Japan website officially shifted from the Prime Minister’s Office to a stand-alone public-interest corporation (kōeki shadanjin). The website ceased active operation on 7 September 2016, although the homepage remains active.
9. Peace Boat was a leader in disaster assistance following the Kobe earthquake. See Avenell (2012).
10. As of December 2016, this project had run more than 140 times and counting.
11. From April 2011 to March 2015, the project sent 22 groups to different locations in Tohoku.
12. The city’s official website features images of the tree, along with pages on its history, symbolism, preservation, and replacement. See Rikuzentakata City (2015a). The Japan Mint also depicted the Miracle Pine on several coins commemorating the 3.11 disasters. See Japan Mint (2014).
13. A Google word search history in Japanese reveals a spike for the combination of ‘volunteer’ and ‘tour’ (ボランティア、ツアー) occurred in May and June 2011, after the state and media promoted this new way to support relief efforts. This demonstrates the sudden inclusion of ‘volunteer tour’ into everyday use.

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