



Claiming Back the Scenic Land





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Tamura City

CW from top:
Decontamination debris piles up beside a paddy;
The Watanabes taking a break;
The Watanabe's first granddaughter helps with the planting

SERIES
FUKUSHIMA

Kawauchi Village

From top:
Yoshitaka harvests rice along with local children;
Wife Sonoko watches children harvesting sweet potatoes;
Visitors take a spin on Yoshitaka's tractor;
Sharing a meal with the visitors at his house

Fukushima Rice Farmers' Stubborn Grit

PHOTO&TEXT
BY YUKI IWANAMI

FUKUSHIMA, Japan - The accident at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station released nuclear fallout into the surrounding area, dealing a huge blow to Fukushima's agriculture. Rice, Japan's dietary staple and most cherished farm product, was not spared, and combined with the industry's recent decline, rice growing in Fukushima is facing a crisis. Many of the rice paddies, a regular feature of Japan's countryside from generations ago, are now covered with weeds and resemble nothing of past days.

This year's approximation sum, the price the Agriculture Co-op pays member farmers for their crop, has declined largely due to decreasing demand, excess inventory and a better than usual crop. Fukushima *koshihikari* rice has especially been hit hard because of unfounded rumors of contamination, and the prices from the Naka-dori and Hama-dori areas have declined 35% from last year to 7,200 yen, and 6,900 yen respectively for 60kg of their top grade rice. I visited three of the affected areas, four years from the accident.

Ryozen Town Oguni District, Date City (Kami Oguni and Shimo Oguni):

The district is over 50km from Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station, but because of its downwind location, some of the houses in the area were designated as "specially identified hortative evacuation spots"^[1] in 2011. During the first harvest after the accident in 2011, rice from two Oguni farmers' paddies revealed levels of radioactive cesium exceeding the government's provisional limit of 500bq/kg. Every grain of rice was withheld from the market, and planting in the entire area was suspended from the following year. Last year, Souyo Sato and Hisao Sato discussed how "if this goes on, the whole scenery will be lost", and decided to resume planting again. So far, including the two Satos, only four farmers in the village have gone back to planting rice. Compared to pre 2011, the crop acreage in Kami Oguni has dropped to a third this year.

"Doesn't this scenery remind you of those old Japanese folktales? I'm proud of this land here", says Souyo as he gazes at the narrow valley flanked by mountains. In the morning, the valley is magically engulfed in a fog. He tells of how the terraced paddies would glow like gold in autumn, and when filled with water during spring, reflect the mountains like mirrors. But that has all changed. Now, abandoned paddies overgrown with weeds dot the area. Some plots have even become temporary holding lots for the debris and

soil resulting from the decontamination efforts. Souyo feels a deep attachment to this land and says that simply living here has brought satisfaction to his life. He used to send the rice and vegetables he harvested to his relatives and close friends, but cannot do that anymore. He won't let his children and grandchildren eat them even if they were said to be safe. Why bother making stuff nobody enjoys eating? His motivation was shattered.

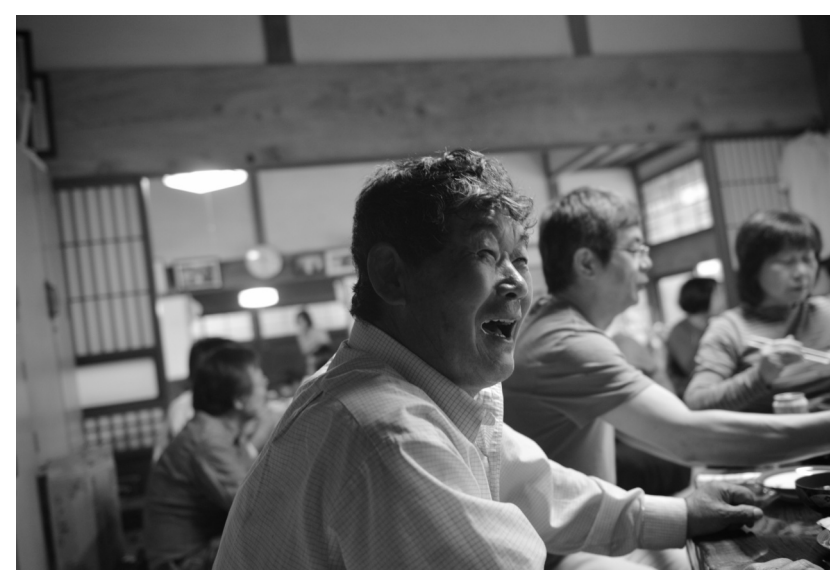
Still, he rose up. Souyo and others started by forming a group called Reclaim Clean Oguni From Radiation, and made maps of air dose rates of the agricultural and residential land within the area. They have also built a system to measure the radiation levels of produce from their district. "Claiming back the old scenic land" is the sole reason he insists on growing rice again.

For the first time in three years, another farmer, Hikaru Seino, started growing rice again. The planting ban was lifted last year, but he hadn't resumed production until now. When Seino's father passed away, he quit his job driving a truck and, along with his wife Yoshiko, became a farmer. His father was a full-time farmer, but by the time Seino inherited the job, times had changed and thriving on farming alone has been difficult. "We used to have more paddies, but there is only so much two old people like us can manage. But this land has been handed down from my ancestors for generations". That is why, he explains, they cannot quit.

Kawauchi Village:

During my visit back in the autumn of 2011, Yoshitaka Akimoto sat slumped at the entrance of his house with his head hung low. He had just finished the task of disposing of the rice he had just harvested. I glimpsed Masashi Akimoto (unrelated) angrily slamming straws of rice against the ground. But when I met them this spring, the two men were smiling broadly, planting rice in the muddy fields along with the visiting children and adults. The entire village of Kawauchi is within the 30km radius of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station, and a planting restriction was put in order in 2011. Wanting to confirm the effects of radiation with their own eyes, the two farmers defiantly continued production, but after strict orders, ended up burying the harvest in the same ground it had come from.

As a full-time farmer, Yoshitaka has dedicated his life to farming. The birth of his first grandchild led him to consider the safety of his food, and instead of chemicals, he started using ducks to get rid of the insects and weeds from his rice paddies.





Through trial and error he now practices organic farming. But in a blink of an eye, the nuclear accident stripped away everything he had built up, and for two unbearably frustrating years, the rice no one would eat had to be disposed.

Finally he is able to produce safe rice again. But that doesn't mean the consumers will embrace the rice from Fukushima, Yoshitaka says. The purchase of this year's and last's crop is guaranteed as part of the government's grain reserve, but after that, things are uncertain. Just carrying on, practicing his old ways felt too risky, so Yoshitaka decided to start inviting people from around Tokyo and other places to take part in the rice planting and harvesting. By getting people involved and having them experience the rice growing process, he hopes they can become confident in the product's safety. Yoshitaka started using the ducks again, and has also branded some of last year's harvest as "*Fukkou*" rice. The name comes from combining two kanji characters symbolizing luck and happiness, and when pronounced, meaning "resurgence". These efforts have not gone unnoticed, and he is now busy fielding visit requests and welcoming guests like local elementary school children and field trips from outside of the prefecture. Yoshitaka's original plan

was to retire when he turned seventy, which happens to be this year. "Yeah, I kinda missed that opportunity" he chuckles.

Cultivation tests were conducted at 30 places in the village in 2012, and by last year, most of the areas besides the restricted-habitation-zone have been cleared for rice planting again. Still, compared to pre-disaster times, crop acreage has only recovered to 60% this year, up from 50% last year.

Tamura City:

Fearing for their grandchild's safety, Tsuneo Watanabe fled to Shiga prefecture with his wife and younger family after the accident. But while helping out at an acquaintance's rice paddy, he was constantly reminded "how nice it would be to plant our own rice". Radiation tests conducted in the summer of 2012 proved that their paddies were safe, so they returned and conditioned the land by sprinkling zeolite and through other processes. Acreage has dropped by a fifth, but Watanabe and his wife have just resumed planting rice for the first time in four years.

About 20 years ago, Watanabe spent several millions of yen to purchase heavy machinery and an industrial

dryer, all the equipment needed for rice farming. There were times when the rice fetched double the current price, but now, "the more we farm, the more we run into the red" he says. Still, he insists "This land has been handed down for generations. We can't let it fall to ruins".

Many of the farmers I talked to explained how after missing several harvests, some just lost the drive to start over. Many of the farms are run by aging farmers, and they are uncertain how long they could continue even if they managed to resume production. But there are those who are still pushing hard, trying to save the rice farming and the beautiful scenery which comes with it, and to pass on the tradition to the younger generation.

All the rice produced in Fukushima is subject to a radiation test, and should the result exceed 100bq/kg, the limit mandated by the Food Sanitation Act, it will not reach market. 100% of the rice from Fukushima tested below this limit in 2014 . In fact, 99.8% tested below 25bq/kg, the lowest detectable level. (Reported in 2014)

Translation by Taro Konishi



Notes
1. Specially Identified Hortative Evacuation Spot
Specific areas with high radiation levels, but not within the 20km radius of the nuclear plant nor included in the former no-go zones or planned evacuation zones. Instead of evacuating entire areas, individual houses were identified, leading to disparities between households. In December 2012, all of these areas within Date City were dissolved after the decontamination processes lowered levels of radiation.

Oguni
CW from top:
Yoshiko stacks harvested straws;
Yoshiko-san planting rice in the mud;
Hisao's son and many others have come from afar to help planting;
Souyou placing a seedling before the house shrine, a custom said to bring a good harvest;
Kami Oguni is dotted with steel fenced holding grounds for decontamination debris





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