

Returning to the Village





PHOTO & TEXT
BY
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KATSURAO VILLAGE, FUKUSHIMA EVACUATION ORDERS ARE LIFTED



The view from the hill was enough to persuade the Hories to move to Katsurao.

On June 16th, more than five years after the village of Katsurao, Fukushima had to be evacuated because of the nuclear accident at the TEPCO Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, the evacuation orders were finally lifted. Although a heavily contaminated small area still remains a so-called "difficult-to-return-zone", out of the municipalities that needed to be totally evacuated, Katsurao became the second one to have the order lifted after Naraha Town in September 2015.

Residents no longer need a special permit to stay overnight and can now live in their homes as before. But that does not necessarily mean life is back to normal. Residents still face hardship, inconveniences and fear.

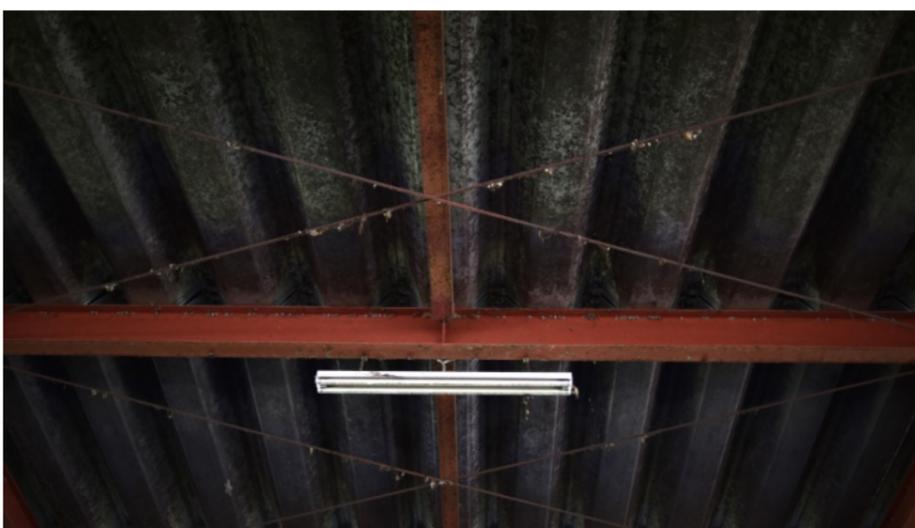
The day the order was lifted, I found Chuji Hanai applying fertilizer back at the village rice paddies. "What's a peasant left to do if he can't farm?" he says. He has been participating in the rice growing experiment where local authorities are testing the effectiveness of the decontamination process, and commutes during the evening to the village from Koriyama where he evacuated and has found another job. After the accident, the abandoned paddies became overgrown with weeds and he watched in dismay as large willow trees sprouted and grew from the middle of them. He envied the farmers in Koriyama who could continue planting rice, and when he heard about the experiment, decided to participate. He now tends to a total of nine thousand square meters including land entrusted to him from neighbors unable to do so themselves. "At times I didn't know what would happen, but hey, no one can argue how beautiful this all looks", he says proudly while looking out at the lush green paddies stretching

through the valley. He still must commute from Koriyama, but after he rebuilds his house, plans to move back to Katsurao. His son has already bought a house in Koriyama, so his hopes of living together again with him, his wife and grandchild won't come true.

On the same day, Masatomi Matsumoto and his wife, Ume were relaxing at their home. Both were born here in Katsurao. They have been going back and forth between the village and their second home at the temporary emergency shelter in Miharu Town. "Oh, It feels so much more comfortable when we stay over here" they say. But Masatomi relies on his twice weekly visit to a nursing-care facility, and Ume needs to visit the hospital. Neither service is available in Katsurao and, despite their wishes, cannot stay here.

Manabu Yoshida doesn't have plans to grow anything in his fields but busies himself plowing them anyway. He is only trying to maintain the land which has been handed down for generations. Besides growing rice, he kept cattle. The paddies were decontaminated, but the rows dividing each paddy were not included in the process, so radio cesium levels exceeding the safety level occasionally get detected from the wild vegetables growing there. "Farmers used to be able to live off the land. What a shame it is now. Go on, step into that forest, the levels are really high there" he urges. I did as he said and found the area just off the main road to measure about $1\mu\text{Sv/h}$. "Am I supposed to return to a place where safety isn't totally guaranteed?", he asks.

Two months before the order was lifted, "Cafe Arashigaoka", the only eatery currently open in the village, started business in Katsurao. For owner Yasunori Horie,



A dairy farm shows five years of neglect. "All you need is one farmer in the village to make good of the idled land. I decided that guy would be me", the owner says. He hopes to resume operations two year from now but faces many obstacles.



Yoshida photographs the paddies to show the others. He no longer feeds the grass to the cattle.



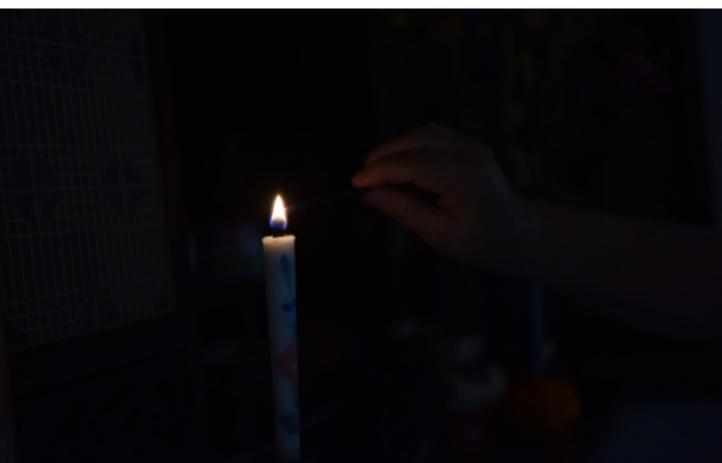
Genji Matsueda with his grandson. Only Matsueda and his wife are returning to the village.



Decontamination waste prevents agriculture from resuming and has become an eyesore.



Wild boar became a problem when the village was abandoned. Villagers look after these two.



Ume prays at the house altar as soon as she comes home and asks her ancestors for support.

originally from Kanagawa, it has been a tumultuous five years. The year before the disaster, Horie was searching for a place to move and to open his own cafe after retiring from his job. He fell in love with Katsurao after being shown around with his wife, Midori, and decided to move there on the spot. The strong wind blowing that day reminded them of "Wuthering Heights" (Arashigaoka in Japanese), and inspired the cafe's name. He bought land, built a house, and started making preparations to open the cafe. But just days before his retirement in March 2011, the nuclear accident happened and the area was designated as an evacuation zone. When he managed to visit two months later, he found cracks in the walls of the newly built house and the plates and cups Midori had painstakingly collected over the many years were all broken. Horie was still living in Kanagawa at the time and could have just given up and stayed there. But he resolved to commit himself to the village, and in June, moved into the temporary shelters along with the other villagers which helped him make many new friends. There were times during the five years that made him consider giving up, but when he saw how the other villagers were also anxious and scared, he started to look forward to opening a place where they could just come and talk about what was on their mind.

As of July 1st, only 1%, or 15 out of 1,467 residents, have returned to Katsurao. There are several reasons behind this. Stores are still closed, making daily life still extremely inconvenient. Former residents have nowhere to return to even if they wish to do so because their heavily damaged homes still need to be torn down and rebuilt. For families with children, after five years, they have already settled down in the towns and cities they evacuated to. Parents have found new jobs and the children new schools. The majority wishing to return are the elderly. Though it was normal in the rural villages and towns to have three generations living together in a single household, many of those ties were severed during the evacuation. Only grandfathers and grandmothers will be returning while the younger families stay behind. The disaster and the following years have already produced many irreversible divides.

The decontamination process, mainly removing radioactive topsoil, was completed for the residential buildings and agricultural land late last year. But step into the hills and radiation levels reach around 0.7μ sV/h- 1μ sV/h. The village authority admits that "There's just no telling what the effect is and we have to leave the decision whether it's safe or not and whether they want to return up to the residents" (note*). Efforts will be made to reopen businesses and the health clinic as soon as possible, and the kindergarten and elementary school should resume classes next April. The authorities understand that the current situation still keeps many of the residents wary from returning and encourages them to live in other places while hoping they will gradually shift their lives back to Katsurao.

Katsurao is just a small village in the mountains. Not many people live here. Growing rice and raising livestock constitutes the main industry though there were times in the past when other activities like producing charcoal, tobacco and even breeding race horses flourished. According to a survey done before the disaster, the village's income ranked lowest of the municipalities in the prefecture. Still, they managed to carry on independently without merging with other towns. The fact that the village had nothing to brag about besides its rich natural environment happened to be its biggest and only selling point drawing many people like Horie to the place. But that nature has now been tarnished by the radioactive fallout.

In June, Committee for Futaba District's Future and other groups arranged for many young people to visit Katsurao and discuss its future. Returning home is just the beginning. Katsurao has only taken its first small step towards its uncertain future. □

Translation by Taro Konishi

(* note) The Japanese Government specifies the annual radiation dose limit as under $1\text{msV}/\text{y}$ (roughly $0.11\mu\text{Sv}/\text{h}$) for the long term, and under $20\text{msV}/\text{y}$ (roughly $2.28\mu\text{Sv}/\text{h}$) as a basis to lift evacuation orders. Both are based on data from the International Commission on Radiological Protection, but the government states that the data is not a threshold determining safety, and says it cannot conclude whether it is safe or not.



The PHOTO JOURNAL

VOL.00 16