

# The Atomic surfers from Fukushima



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On 11 March 2011, at 2.46 pm, Japan was hit by a magnitude 9.0 earthquake which generated a tsunami on the coast. Here, on Futaba beach, the giant wave destroyed the first floor of a hotel.



18,500 people died, 90% of them drowned in the tsunami wave. The bodies of 2,561 people were never found. Steles in their honor can be seen along the roads.



Five years later, the scars of the tsunami are still visible, like in the town of Tomioka. The law now prohibits living in areas destroyed by the tsunami. Only industrial or commercial activities are allowed, but very few have applied.



Road barriers were bent out of shape by the powerful waves. Only the police still patrols in the area to monitor the few houses that are still standing and to control curious visitors. In the distance, speakers encourage workers to consult a doctor in case of persistent migraines.



The tsunami hit the Daaitchi nuclear plant, seen here from Futaba beach. The catastrophe was rated level 7, the equivalent of Chernobyl. Over the course of five years, nearly 50,000 people have worked – with strong financial incentives – to decontaminate the plant and stop leaks.



Radiations sensors indicate the level of radioactivity, but in these red zones classified as "difficulty to return to zones" by the government, no one is there to read them. 1 millisievert is the maximum radiation dose allowed for Japanese per year.



Residents receive compensation from TEPCO company based on the degree of contamination of their home. In the red zone, they receive \$1,000 a month per person. This has created tensions in the population because those who live on the other side of the barrier, like here in Tomioka, don't receive anything.





In the "orange zone," residents have the right to visit their home if they wish to take care of it, like here in Naraha. This man has come to weed his garden. His wife refuses to come back and he will not bring his children. He never sleeps in his contaminated home. He is well placed to know the danger: he used to work at the nuclear plant.



Cities distant from the sea were only affected by the earthquake and the radiations. They have now turned into ghost towns. In total, nearly 500,000 people were evacuated because of the tsunami and the nuclear accident.



Graffitis on the atom on the storefront of a sports store abandoned since 2011.



Workers are decontaminating a school in the town of Litate: « we remove 5 to 30 cm of soil and put it in plastic bags, which we store on the outskirts of town, pending a better solution. ». A full year of work will be necessary to make the school clean again. Only workers have been living in Litate for now...



30 million tons of contaminated soil are stocked in a host of open-air sites. The problem has simply been displaced for now ...



Tairatoyoma beach, in the prefecture of Fukushima, 50 km from the nuclear plant, used to be one of the most popular areas with Japanese surfers before the accident. Despite the sand and the water being contaminated, surfers continue to come here.



*"I come and surf several times a week. It's my passion. I can't stop surfing." However, the sign in Japanese indicates that the area is a forbidden zone.*



*"The earth shook, we came back on the beach and a few minutes later, the tsunami wave arrived. None of the surfers who were on the beach died, as we had time to escape. Those who were in their homes were taken by the waves by surprise and they died."*





The beach used to be famous for its white sand, but the tsunami took everything away. Now, a concrete wall offers protection against the waves. A few rare foreigners venture here to surf according to the Japanese surfers...



*"The government keeps telling us that things are back to normal in the region. But we can see that few people have come back. There are only elderly people. Children are kept away..."*



The surfers cannot ignore the risks: on site, there are hundreds of bags of contaminated sand piled up.



*"I still live in Tairatoyoma. Even though I lost many relatives in the tsunami that washed away our home, I don't have any choice. My job is here."*



*"I put on sunscreen against the sun but I haven't found anything against radiations."*



*"It took me a year before I started surfing again..."* Fukushima prefecture people supported the construction of nuclear power plants in the region because it brought jobs and prosperity in this rural area.



*"We will only know the true consequences of our time in the water 20 years from now..."*, a surfer admits with resignation. When asked, an employee of the nuclear plant says that he would never swim here: the water is too contaminated. Five of his friends who work at the plant now have brain damages...



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