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Lifestyle sports & post-disaster resurgence: Preliminary findings from Fukushima's surf tourism development

ライフスタイルスポーツと震災復活: 福島のサーフツーリズム開発に関する初期的研究

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I. Introduction

This study explores the relationship between lifestyle sports and post-disaster recovery. Specifically, I examine how individuals and communities attempt reimagine, rebuild, and renew bonds with disturbed coastlines through surfing. As part of a broader study examining how communities forge new modes of dwelling and belonging against the backdrop of contaminated seas, this paper explores lifestyle sport tourism's contribution towards rebuilding human-ocean bonds in post-disaster coastal destination recovery.

Research examining the relationship between lifestyle sports and post-disaster recovery is an emerging and timely area of study, but examples are rare. One notable example is Thorpe's (2014) research investigating how lifestyle sport enthusiasts are able to rebuild personal connections with the natural and urban environments following the 2010/2011 Christchurch earthquakes. Others suggest lifestyle sport participants develop unique bonds with the natural environment and are among the first people to reengage with nature following disasters. And yet, analyses of the relationship between lifestyle sport and post-disaster resurgence of human-nature relations are limited.

This study adds to this emerging literature by detailing the case of surf tourism development at Kitaizumi beach in Minamisoma, Fukushima. There are a growing number of studies in the coastal regions of Miyagi Prefecture exploring post-disaster tourism development leisure constraints and facilitators, and the role recreation plays in psychological recovery. Research has also outlined the current state of marine sports in Miyagi and Ibaraki Prefectures. The emerging literature examines what is typically generalised as 'Tohoku', however Fukushima is frequently absent from such studies. Accordingly, further empirical research is needed in Fukushima to achieve a more comprehensive picture of contemporary Tohoku's disaster recovery. Three research questions guide this study:

1. What role, if any, might surf tourism destination development play in rebuilding relations between people, and between communities and the sea in post-disaster Fukushima?
2. How do disaster recovery efforts enhance and/or block the resurgence of human-nature relations?
3. How does surf tourism function within post-disaster recovery spaces and places?

II. Method

To address these questions the study draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the fall of 2017 and 2018 along the Pacific coast of Fukushima Prefecture referred to locally as 'Hamadori'. The fieldwork comprises a compilation of media analysis, participant observation, semi-structured interviews, ethnographic field notes, post-surf discussions, and informal conversations. Twelve in depth interviews were recorded and transcribed with recreational surfers, the Fukushima Surf Association, surf industry, local government, and surf tourism promotional agencies. Two fieldwork trips to Kitaizumi beach in March and May 2019 were also conducted to focus more specifically on the theme of surf tourism destination development.

III. Findings

Initial fieldwork revealed two interrelated narratives highlighting the importance of surf tourists and surf tourism for communities in the Hamadori Region. First, local surfers reported a hope to see more surf tourists coming back to Fukushima to aid in the economic, social, and cultural recovery of the coastline. Surfers described feeling isolated, resulting not only in economic losses for the surf industry, but also a sense of frustration and alienation as a result of the reportedly 'bad rumours' [*fuhyō higai*] surrounding the disaster. Second, surfers reported wanting to share with domestic and international audiences the nuances of the current environmental context. Echoing Pezzullo's (2007) study on toxic tourism, surf tourism in Fukushima was described as offering an opportunity for meaningful and embodied communication exchange with which to share stories, experiences, feelings, living conditions, and points of debate. Surf tourism development was seen as a way to develop better understandings of contemporary issues and inspire additional support for communities still suffering from a wide range of ongoing 'contaminations'; social and economic as much as ecological.

With these issues in mind, various stakeholders began meeting early in 2019 to discuss the potential of surf tourism development in Minamisoma City. The

triple disaster on March 11, 2011 put an abrupt stop to seven-years of previously successful surf tourism development. Coastal infrastructure vanished and access to public beaches were prohibited. Recovery efforts tended towards top-down techno-managerial prevention measures for future disasters. For instance, the construction of 405 kilometres of concrete seawalls and the *Act on Development of Areas Resilient to Tsunami Disasters* aimed at creating tsunami-resilient communities. Such recovery efforts define what could or could not be built on or near the beach, including a restriction on the construction of campsites, which was a competitive advantage of Kitaizumi's surf destination. Such techno-managerial responses contribute to what Tsing (2017) refers to as 'blocked resurgence', limiting the ability to reconnect communities with the sea. That said, surfers are looking forward to the official reopening of Kitaizumi beach in July 2019. The 'Happy Island Surf Tourism' NPO has regained its municipal funding to begin surf tourism destination development, including restarting the lifeguard program and hosting a national surf competition. This is expected to bring ocean-based employment and surf tourists back to the area. In this way surf tourism was described as an important strategy for rebuilding human-ocean bonds in the wake of disaster.

IV. Conclusion

This study highlights how human-ocean bonds kept people connected to Fukushima, encouraging young surfers to stay in or return to region. Surf tourism was also understood as a transition phase in post-disaster tourism development where meaningful 'disaster recovery' means thinking how the sea makes possible the recovery of disturbed coastlines. I argue resurgence in the wake of disaster requires rebuilding human-ocean relations first. Additional research in this field could aid in developing more holistic policy recommendations for sustainable for long-term post-disaster resurgence along disturbed coastlines.

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