

Japan: Residents of Tsunami-hit Town Plan Disaster Tourism

A group of residents is using what little is left in their tsunami-devastated town of Otsuchi, Iwate Prefecture, to raise funds through tourism. Keiichi Abe, 43, who heads the group, and other members were discussing how they can make money on their own, without relying on outside assistance, when they concluded that the only choice was to use the tsunami-hit town itself as a tourist center. The group, called Oraga Otsuchi Yume Hiroba Sozo linkai, outlined its business plans at the end of September.



With no stores left in downtown Otsuchi, tourists will stay at residents' homes and experience fishing and farming. The group plans to set up a showroom to display the March 11 tsunami damage and history of the town as well as train guides. It also plans to produce souvenirs that best represent the disaster zone and homemade dishes using local specialties.

The group consists of about 20 members, mostly in their 20s to 40s, including supporters and consultants. Abe said the residents need to work with companies willing to provide advice and help the group expand its sales channels.

Abe met Masaki Yamauchi, president of Yamato Transport Co., in Otsuchi in late September. The parcel delivery company has been supporting areas hit by the March 11 Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami. Yamauchi promised whatever help the company can provide. "What will be important is to find business partners," Abe said.

In late August, Abe worked as a guide on a trial basis for about 50 businesspeople and students from Okayama Prefecture who came to observe the quake-hit areas. Fishermen, farmers and young people took them around in their cars and recounted their experiences during the tsunami.



The visitors, impressed by the way Abe's group organized the tour with a handcrafted touch, plan to return next year.

The visitors, in fact, wanted to stay in Otsuchi, but the residents were unable to make preparations in time, according to Sachiko Motomochi, 37, a group member. Sales of about 200,000 yen (\$2,610) came only from meal expenses.

Otsuchi Mayor Yutaka Ikarigawa said he welcomes the residents' initiatives to start business on their own, and that the town government will do the best it can to help them. Some companies have already been organizing tours in disaster areas.



Sanriku Railway Co. in Iwate Prefecture, which started such tours in May, has accepted 1,094 people from 76 groups. It has reservations from about 20 groups for October.

JTB Tohoku Inc. followed suit in October, offering tours around devastated areas in Rikuzentakata and Ofunato, both in Iwate Prefecture.

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<http://ajw.asahi.com>

Date: 2011-11-28

Article link:

<http://www.tourism-review.com/travel-tourism-magazine-disaster-tourism-in-japan-to-help-destroyed-town-article1694>