

# Position Transition from 'I in Okuma' to 'Okuma in me': Generating Narratives of Hope after Structural Loss of the Hometown

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Hometown loss  
by radiation  
decontamination work  
in Okuma

# Reconstruction and Radiation decontamination

- Mar 2011: Great East Japan earthquake and Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant (FDNPP) accident
- 2012-: radiation decontamination work to improve a pollution
- Byproduct: Large amount of radioactive waste after decontamination

Date	Status
Mar 2011	Evacuation orders based on radius from FDNPP
Apr 2012	Re-designation: " <b>difficult-to-return zones</b> ," "no-residence zones," and "zones being prepared for lifting of evacuation order"
Apr 2014 to Apr 2017	Progress of decontamination and the lifted evacuation orders for municipalities
Aug 2022	Reconstructing the "difficult-to-return zones."



Radiation decontamination work removing the radioactive topsoil to decrease the dose rate (photo by TH in Oct 2014 at a municipality in Fukushima)

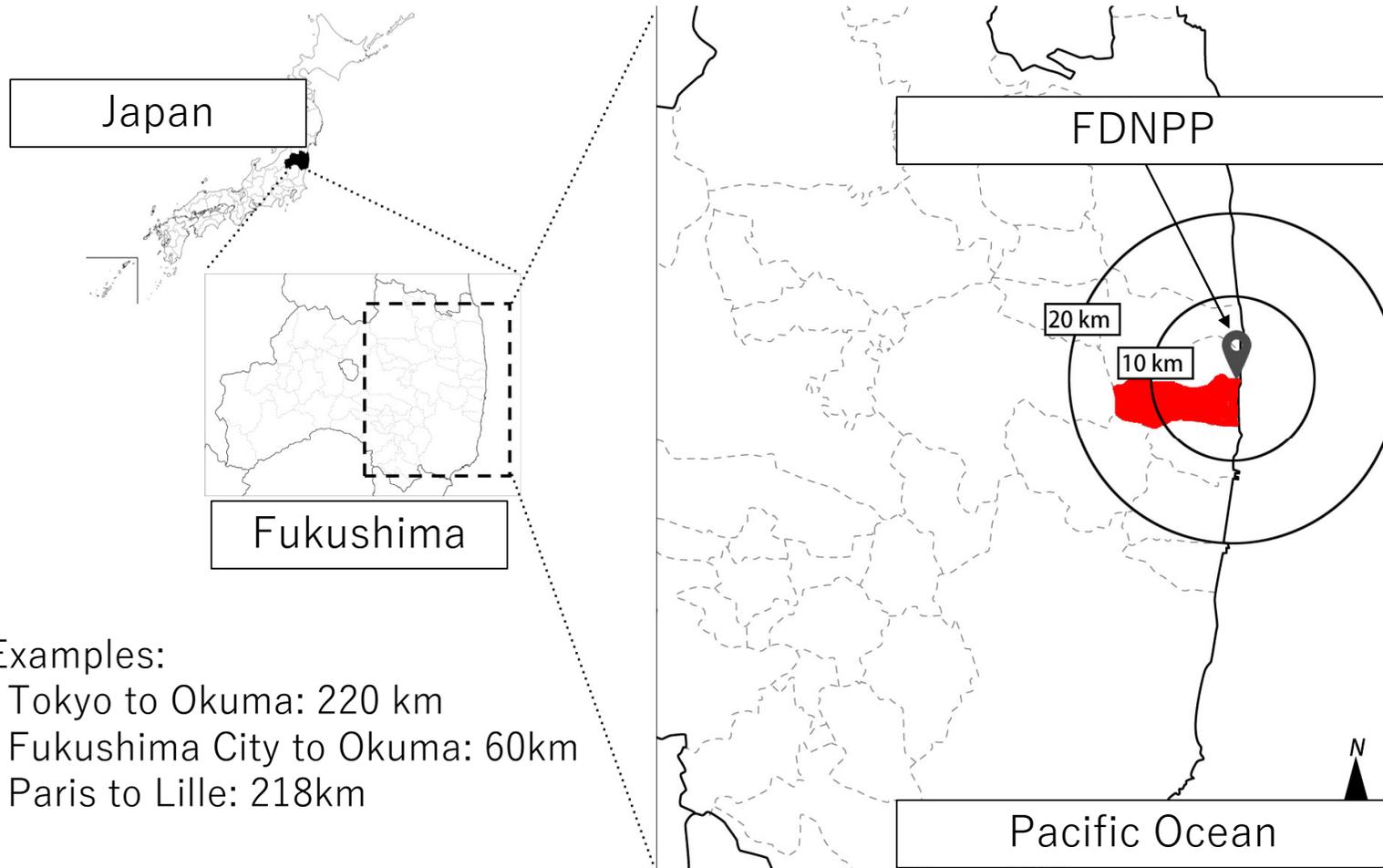


Temporary placement of waste: the black bags with the waste was placed next to a private house. (photo by TH in Apr 2015 at a municipality in Fukushima)

# Interim Storage Facility (ISF)

- Needs of Interim Storage Facility (ISF) to store large amount of radioactive waste until a final disposal site could be determined.
- Condition(s) of ISF: “Areas requiring special decontamination due to high radiation doses.” = highly polluted areas (Ministry of Env, 2011)  
→ **Okuma** and Futaba towns in Fukushima prefecture where FDNPP is located were selected.
- Separation from the familiar Okuma - **hometown loss** due to ISF: Residents of Okuma provided their land for the construction of ISF by sale or transfer the right of use to the government up to 30 years.

# Geographical information and function of ISF



Examples:

Tokyo to Okuma: 220 km

Fukushima City to Okuma: 60km

Paris to Lille: 218km



From Tokyo Shimbun:  
<https://www.tokyo-np.co.jp/article/8692>

# Neglected hometown loss in Okuma

- Radiation decontamination work itself may not be considered a disaster; rather, such work can be reported as a positive topic in the context of progress of reconstruction.
- The hometown loss of Okuma residents over the ISF is, therefore, overlooked.
- The experiences regarding the hometown loss in Okuma townspeople should be clarified to find support measures.

# Research questions and purpose

Purpose: to describe the process of generating narratives of hope after hometown loss of Okuma and discuss the psychological/relational background of the process, by inquiring the following three questions:

Q1: How did the townspeople perceive the interim storage facility?

Q2: What changes have occurred to the townspeople?

Q3: What are the characteristics of loss in the case of Okuma?

History of Okuma town,  
informants, and analytical  
perspectives

# History of Okuma town

- A municipality had the FDNPP and placed in the eastern coast of Fukushima Pref.
- A large area on the east side of town, near the FDNPP, used for ISF since 2015.
- Population:
  - 11,505 before the FDNPP accident (2010)
  - 374 after the accident (2022)



# Informants and analytical perspectives

- Longitudinal interviews from 2019
- Informants: 4 persons who lived in Okuma when the earthquake and FDNPP accident occurred.
  - Aizawa (male in his 70s)
  - Inoue (male in his 60s)
  - Ueda (male in his 60s)
  - Ezaki (female in her 60s)

\* Informants were living outside of Okuma at the time of the interviews.
- Analytical perspectives
  - Along with the time course, the life events and hardship at the time of occurrence of the earthquake and FDNPP accident, perception about the construction of ISF, and the current orientation regarding future return to their hometown, were interviewed and then analyzed to inquire our research questions.

*Structural loss* of the hometown

Q1. How did the townspeople  
perceive the interim storage  
facility?

# Lack of debate and consensus?

- “I heard in the newspapers that the Ministry of Environment was planning to construct an ISF, and then I heard same news in PRs from Okuma town. The procedures and plan of ISF **became gradually evident in various information sources.**” (Aizawa, July 22, 2019)
- “We, the townspeople, were not sure about what is the ISF at all. The town announced that the decision process of ISF acceptance was very tough, but **we hardly discussed it at all. It was like, ‘Oh, it's been decided?’**” (Inoue, July 29, 2019)
- “**Because I am living here, a municipality other than Okuma, I did not have much concrete information about ISF.** When something like this happens, it's not a smooth process to deal with the Ministry of the Environment and other related sectors.” (Ueda, July 30, 2019)

# Not convinced, but agreed

- “After temporal returning was allowed after long days (years), I found the radiation decontamination waste piled up along the roads to the Okuma. The sites such as gymnastic hall of elementary school which rescued me at the time of evacuation were converted to the waste yard. **So, I feel I had to do something about it.**” (Aizawa, July 23, 2019)
- “**I think it cannot be helped for that matter.** The fact is that this region, the Okuma town, was severely polluted by radiation. It may be good option to bring the contaminated materials from other places to Okuma to reduce the contamination and radiation dose of other areas as much as possible.” (Inoue, July 29, 2019)
- “I have been prepared to the situation of waste acceptance to the town. If we left the waste, the interim storage and reconstruction would not progress at all. That is what I thought. If we were to talk about where to store it, the Okuma town inevitably comes to the option. The point is the way how to speed up the recovery process. **I am not convinced, but I agreed** to provide my land.” (Ueda, July 30, 2019)

# A1. Perception as an agent to ISF placement

- In spite of lack of debate, the informants agreed with the ISF in order to speed up the recovery process, even though they were not convinced.
- They recognized that their decision could affect the future of the entire recovery process.
- **Perception as an agent to ISF placement:** the informants had **passive** role in their “loss of hometown” due to the FDNPP accident, but at the same time, they were aware of their **active** position and responsibility as residents of Okuma, who had benefited from the FDNPP.

*Structural loss* of the hometown

Q2. What changes have occurred  
to the townspeople?

# Threat to place attachment and distress

- “In the past, I went into a mountain or played in a river of Okuma, but **it is difficult to go to such places after FDNPP accident**. I have no chance of getting back the past situation even after 30 years. So, I thought about settling down here, a municipality other than Okuma.” (Inoue, Dec 12, 2020)
- “After my retirement, I planted my own peaches, pears, and apples in my yard in Okuma. I was eagerly awaiting the harvest every years, and sufficient amount of fruits were obtained from such private fruit trees. **I cannot do that anymore. When I (temporary) returned and confirmed my yard, I found the trees were in a state of disrepair. I'll be like, 'Ugh'; I can't even look at it anymore.**” (Aizawa, Nov 14, 2020)

# Facing the fact of a benefit from FDNPP

- **For the overall economy, I think now that Okuma was rather wealthy.** We had sewage systems in our area earlier on than surrounded municipalities. We had complete sewage systems in the 1970s, so it was rather early. (Ueda, July 30, 2019)
- Before the placement of FDNPP, everyone had to go out to work when winter came, because no industries were established in Okuma other than agriculture. After the FDNPP, we could earn in the town working in the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) related companies. **Townspeople believed that TEPCO made them wealthier**, and thus they didn't say bad things about TEPCO. (Ezaki, Dec 7, 2019)
- I am always criticizing the Okuma administration. However, I recognize that it is a heavy burden to expect the Okuma town administration to revitalize the community. The Okuma town may not have enough resources of human, economy, or knowledge. In fact, **we have relied on TEPCO whenever something happens.** (Inoue, Dec 12, 2020)

# Position fluctuations due to residence transition

- “I haven't even changed my residence certificate\*. **I'm not a full citizen of here.**” (Aizawa, Nov 14, 2020)

\* residence certificate: a document which officially certifies where the person lives. The address on the residence certificate does not necessarily correspond to the actual place of residence.

- “**My certificate of residence is still Okuma**, but this will eventually change. Although I am not sure how long I can keep this status, I will become a resident here in future. I'm planning to settle down here.” (Inoue, Nov 25, 2019)

## A2. Changes of positions (reorganization)

- To talk about their experiences as residents of Okuma, they had to face the fact that we have benefited from the FDNPP.
- The position of “I in Okuma (Okuma resident)” was unstable; there was a gap in membership since they kept an Okuma resident membership by residence certification (“I in Okuma”), but did not live in Okuma actually.
- **Changes of positions (reorganization)**: by reorganizing the ‘I in Okuma’ position to a part of self, they may have gained a position to speak as a person who is physically away from Okuma, but still a strongly-related person of Okuma.

*Structural loss* of the hometown

Q3: What are the characteristics of loss in the case of Okuma?

## “Interim” nature of facilities

- “No municipalities will agree with the placement of the **final** disposal facilities. What is the government going to do if no place is found for the final disposal sites? **If the government cannot find the place, they should take the wastes to the TEPCO head office in Tokyo.** That is the only thing we must make them promise.” (Aizawa, July 23, 2019)
- “The land around the ISF can be utilized after decontamination. The term “utilization” means not only that the landowners will return to their homes, but also that they will be able to use their own property rights. **We, the landowners, will be able to rent, sell, or otherwise use the vacant land, and such utilization contributes to the reconstruction of the region.** This is my personal opinion.” (Ueda, Nov 28, 2020)

## Resisting “localization of the waste problem to Fukushima”

- **If they cannot, they should take the wastes to the TEPCO head office in Tokyo.** (Aizawa)

Seeing the disposal issues as a matter of company, government, and whole Japan, instead of Okuma.

- **We, the landowners, will be able to rent, sell, or otherwise use the vacant land, and such utilization contributes to the reconstruction of the region.**

Making the situation that people and industries outside Okuma involved in.

- Resisting “localization of the waste problem to Fukushima”:  
Narratives of strong opposition to trivializing the establishment of an ISF and final disposal site as an issue for Okuma alone.

## A3. Structural loss of the hometown in Okuma

- Structure: “localization of the waste problem to Fukushima”  
→ ***Structural loss of the hometown in Okuma***

[History of localization by comparison]

- FDNPP placement (1960s):  
Tokyo the “metropolis” vs. Okuma the “Tibet in Japan”  
(Okuma Town history, 1985)
- ISF placement (2010s):  
Prefectures/Municipalities other than Okuma vs. eastern side of Okuma (Ministry of Env, 2011)
- Structure = Enduring Characteristics:  
Persistent imposition of a problem on small unit of community such as underpopulated area.

## Narrative to resist the structure and generate hope

- Q1. How did the townspeople perceive the interim storage facility? : **Perception as an agent to ISF placement**
  - Q2. What changes have occurred to the townspeople?: **Changes of positions (reorganization)**
  - Q3: What are the characteristics of loss in the case of Okuma?: ***Structural loss with the structure* “localization of the waste problem to Fukushima”**
- 
- **Narrative as practice to resist to the structure and generate hope**, by questioning the structure and increasing the possible options other than “localization of the waste problem to Fukushima.”

## Narrative to resist the structure and generate hope

- Hometown loss of Okuma as ***structural loss***
- Informants may have been aware of this structure, although not explicitly, as shown in their narratives to relate other regions, people, and industries with Okuma.
- **Narrative as practice to resist to the structure and generate hope**, by questioning the structure and increasing the possible options other than “localization of the waste problem to Fukushima.”

# Generating Narratives of Hope

# Temporal and spatial confusion, and nostalgia

- Temporal and spatial confusion experience:  
“When I wake up in the morning, I think about where I am; for a moment, **I wonder where I am sleeping. I also think, "What am I doing today?" and "What should I do?"** Well, I may have similar experience even if I stayed in Okuma. But, I check where I am now.” (Ueda, Dec 18, 2019)
- Nostalgia:  
“I used to go to our neighbors' houses, even if we had nothing to do, and drink tea. **It is a pity that in I don't have that kind of interaction here, such as talking in the fields around there.**”  
[interviewee asked: do you want to go back to your hometown?  
“Sure. If only that hadn't happened.” (Ezaki, Aug 23, 2019)

## Community activities generating new interaction

- Whereas informants reported their confusion and nostalgia over hometown, they have been active in reestablishing their own connections with others.
- Community activities:
  - Aizawa's case: establishing a salon-style forum for Okuma residents to talk about their daily life issues, and launching a grassroots campaign **in collaboration with regional health center staff, with whom they had no previous contact**, to help Okuma residents adjust to evacuation and relocation.
  - Ueda's case: working as a ward head of the district where he used to live, to integrate the residents of the district and **lobby the national government and related agencies**.

## The "Okuma in me" through new connections

- I in Okuma: the position of self as "I in Okuma" is a precondition for thought and action. Therefore, the construction of the ISF inevitably entailed temporal and spatial confusion, and nostalgia.
- Okuma in me: engaging in community activities that create new interactions, such as "creating a forum" (Aizawa) and "acting as a ward head" (Ueda), a new position "Okuma in me" may grow by utilizing the "Okuma in me" of the past.
- **Generating hope to avoid being trapped in the hometown loss:** the perspective that "I" do not belong to the town but the town belongs to "me"; positioning a "town resident (I in Okuma)" as one of their many attributes.

Conclusion

## Hope resisting the “*structural loss*” of hometown

- Informants faced with structural hometown loss with the structure “localization of the waste problem to Fukushima.”
- Temporal and spatial confusion, and nostalgia were of concern; however, the informants had new interaction with neighbors through community activities.
- Informants generated narratives of hope by changing the position from “I in Okuma” in which informants make sense of their ISF placement experiences as “loss” to “Okuma in me” in which they generate narrative of “hope” with past, present, and future perspectives.

# Life-ethnography to describe the life

- Reality for support: The need to depict what "loss of hometown" meant to the people involved in ethnographic form, and thereby raise the public awareness of their reality and situation, to enhance support.
- How we describe the life?: possibility of "life-ethnography" as a methodology for understanding the meaning of certain events for the whole "way of life".