The Tohoku Japan Earthquake of 2011

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Abstract

In March of 2011, the world was shaken by the news of an earthquake that delivered a devastating tsunami to the coast of northern Japan. Amid the horrific loss of life and property, the records of that region of Japan, were placed in great jeopardy. As Japan had switched to a more modern system of centralized governmental districts, the older, historic records had often remained neglected in obscure and unsecured archives, sometimes even in the homes of heirs of former officials. Nearly a year after the tsunami, the Restoration Project for Damaged Documents was launched. Hundreds of volunteers are helping to collect, repair and restore the remains of historical documents of this region of Japan using low impact drying methods and digital copying of the documents which will eventually be made available to the Japanese public.

Keywords: Tohoku, Japan, earthquake, tsunami, digitization, records, restoration of records, disaster recovery, document salvage, National Archives of Japan, Restoration Project for Damaged Documents, National Archives Act of Japan,
In March 2011, the Great Earthquake of Tohoku-Japan generated a devastating tsunami impacting shorelines throughout the Pacific. Northern Japan was severely affected; entire cities and villages were swept away. In the midst of the disaster, approximately 20,000 persons lost their lives and the financial loss has been estimated at roughly 220 billion U.S. dollars (Takayama, 2012). In addition to the enormous loss of life, administrative functions were almost entirely disrupted, leaving an uncertain effect on public records for the entire region. Within a month of the disaster, the Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary instructed each local government to take great care to “preserve records and materials of facts and processes of the great earthquake” so that a disaster recovery plan could be established (Takayama, 2012).

**The history of Japanese record keeping**

Japan has existed as a feudal society since the 16\(^{th}\) century. In 1889, a new system merged traditional feudal communities into government districts were established. In the feudal tradition, community leaders’ homes served not only as the seat of power, but also where public records were maintained (Shirai, 2012). During the transition to Modern Japan, independent government offices were built in the new districts. Official records concerning current land ownership and inhabitants were brought under control of the new district administration, but other records remained with the traditional community leaders and in many cases have been passed down to their descendants.

In the late 1950s, new local governments were formed as prefectures that required the older district governments to pass forward current vital records to the new prefecture administrative offices. Many historic records were left behind in the repositories of the old district government offices. In the decades that followed, more of the historic (non-...
current) records from the early 1900’s were simply forgotten about and sometimes lost. It wasn’t until the 1970s that a group of historians known as the *Association of Japanese Local History Researchers* began a movement to save the historic documents remaining under the control of the descendants of the traditional community leaders (Shirai, 2012).

In 1987, Japan established its National Archives. Article 3 of the *National Archives Act* requires local governments be responsible for selecting and preserving historically important official documents. An investigation conducted by Kenji Tomita in 2012 showed that there were only 60 local public archives out of a total of 1789 local governments. This limited number shows that many historic documents remain unprotected. Shirichi Shirai, associate professor of the Library, Information and Media Science at the University of Tsukuba, Japan, attributes the lack of a comprehensive nation-wide records management system to several attributes of Japanese system: (1) while most local governments understand records retention schedules, they do not understand the importance of protecting historical documents; (2) it is unclear to local government employees which official records should be selected as historically important; and (3) there is little or no budget appropriated to training staff, nor funding for the establishment of public archives (2012).

In a survey conducted by the National Archives of Japan after the great earthquake of 2011, it was found that of the 127 localities affected by the disaster, 26 local governments reported damage to official records, 18 of these local governments were directly affected by the tsunami wave (Takayama, 2012). In an effort to support local efforts to salvage the stricken records, the National Archives of Japan launched the *Restoration Project for Damaged Documents* in January 2012. Experts were deployed to
train local staff and volunteers to restore damaged official documents, and provided help to acquire the equipment needed to complete the restoration process. The techniques focused on removing mud and mold from official documents, essential techniques considering the large number of water-damaged records. The National Archives experts realized that with the large quantities of water damaged records, that the majority of the salvage effort should be focused on dealing with the immediate problems of damp and mold.

The National Archives began phase two of the restoration process in July, sending experts to train local staff advanced techniques including restoration of missing parts with Japanese paper, backing and book binding. Throughout the process, university faculty and students, archivists, museum curators and librarians assisted the National Archives experts. The University faculty and archivists focused their attention on salvaging vital records, whereas the museum curators and librarians assisted communities with the salvaging and restoration of cultural artifacts.

**Lessons learned**

Besides the human and economic devastation caused by the great Tohoku earthquake of 2011, many historical public documents were irrevocably lost, washed away by the tsunami waves. Old documents stored in public archives and in private residences of the descendants of community leaders were not safe; nor were electronic records safe if they had not been backed up to a secondary location. The effects of this disaster have served as an impetus to develop more comprehensive disaster prevention strategies. Solutions include deciding where facilities should be built to preserve
historically important documents, decentralizing documents and data storage, and making copies of important documents.

After gathering records regarding the great earthquake from local governments, Japan’s National Archives established principles regarding the preservation, conservation, and restoration of records and archives. It had determined that a research and study database should be created containing records and lessons learned from the combined earthquake, tsunami disaster, and nuclear accident to share with stakeholders in the international community. Restoration, conservation and preservation of damaged official documents in the areas affected by the incident required a triage-type action to determine which records needed immediate intervention. Importance has been placed on digitization projects to capture official records, as well as documents and visual images of regional importance for use in an electronic database created by the National Archives of Japan that will be made accessible to the public.

Document salvage operations were made possible not only through the help of trained National Archives staff, but University faculty and students, librarians, and museum curators who volunteered to assist in the salvage effort. Without the volunteers, the recovery of the official records would not have been possible. The National Archives of Japan has stepped up efforts to digitize official records at the local level so that the records are duplicated and kept in different locations to add a level of security. Lessons learned from this national tragedy have been documented and shared with the larger records community for research. The information gathered during recovery efforts will be useful for other communities worldwide as the inevitability of similar disasters striking elsewhere.
References
