

Progress of Collaboration in Disaster Preparedness for Cultural Properties after the Great East Japan Earthquake

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Abstract:

This paper describes how communities which are involved in preservation and conservation of cultural heritage in Japan struggled in response to the Great East Japan Earthquake for the first two years. It also discusses the progress of collaboration to rescue the damaged materials. The first part of the presentation features the rescue activities of the Rescue Programme for Cultural Properties organized by the Agency for Cultural Affairs, in which a wide variety of professional institutions and groups participated.

The NDL, the hosting library of IFLA PAC regional center for Asia took part in the programme, as well as carrying out independent projects to support affected libraries. Based on our experience, we realized that the ways of cooperating for disaster preparedness in the library community were a little different from those in museum or archives communities. These differences will be described in the middle section. Finally, the fruits of the two-year Rescue Programme and some issues still to be solved will be presented.

Keywords:

disaster preparedness, disaster response, earthquake, Japan, cultural heritage

Background: Damage Caused by the Great East Japan Earthquake

On March 11, 2011 at 2:46 p.m. (Japan Standard Time), an earthquake of magnitude 9.0, the largest to hit Japan since records began, struck from its epicenter in the Pacific Ocean off Japan. Violent tremors and a subsequent tsunami caused severe damage over a wide area of the Pacific east coast from the Tohoku (north-east) to the Kanto (south-east) region, extending over hundreds of kilometers. The disaster took more than 15 thousand lives, and over 2,600 people are still missing even though two years have passed since the disaster happened. A wide area has been contaminated with radiation released as a result of the nuclear power plant accident in Fukushima, and even now an “evacuation zone” where entry is forbidden remains in Fukushima Prefecture.

Library communities in Japan suffered severe damage on a scale never before experienced. Water damage was brought about not only by the tsunami, but also by sprinkler breakdown and leaking pipes. As a result of falling off shelves or damage to the shelving itself, massive numbers of books suffered physical damage such as spines or binding structures breaking and pages coming apart. Even in areas far distant from the epicenter of the quake, the tremors tossed books off of their shelves. At the Tokyo Main Library of the National Diet Library (hereinafter called the NDL), nearly four hundred kilometers far from the epicenter, approximately 1.8 million books fell onto the floor in the stacks on upper floors.

1 THE RESCUE PROGRAMME FOR CULTURAL PROPERTIES

1) Organizing a national-level rescue programme

Many institutions which hold cultural properties for preservation, such as museums, art museums, archives and libraries, have suffered from the Great East Japan Earthquake on March 11, 2011. The Agency for Cultural Affairs, judging from information on damage to cultural properties throughout the affected area, decided to organize a cross-institutional and nationwide programme to rescue those disaster-affected materials.

On April 1, the Committee for Salvaging Cultural Properties Affected by the 2011 Earthquake off the Pacific Coast of Tohoku and Related Disasters, generally known as the Rescue Committee, was established at the request of the Agency for Cultural Affairs, and the Rescue Programme for Cultural Properties started as a yearly project, which was later extended until March 2013.

While the same type of rescue programme was implemented after the Kobe Earthquake in 1995 for 70 days, the implementation period is much longer this time and the number of groups involved is much bigger as the damage was so devastating.

The Rescue Programme, of course, was not the only project to rescue cultural properties after the disaster. Activities by local communities in the affected prefectures, projects by commercial companies, non-profit organizations, colleges or universities were implemented, but the Rescue Programme is remarkable as a national-level and cross-institutional project.

2) Purposes and targets of the Rescue Programme for Cultural Properties

The purposes of the Rescue Programme were to salvage damaged cultural properties from the disaster site, to give them first-aid treatment, and to keep them in appropriate storage in a good environment. It did not aim to return the items to the original owners with complete restoration. The fundamental principle of the programme was “to treat all the cultural properties salvaged from the site equally without making a value judgment on them”.

The targets were not only national or local designated cultural properties, but also pictures, sculptures, archeological materials, ancient documents, etc. which had not yet been designated. In addition, natural historical materials such as stuffed specimens or shells and books and magazines published in modern times, which Japanese people had not tended to regard as cultural heritage, were included in the targets. It was regarded as important to rescue all kinds of local records and memories for recovery of the disaster-affected communities. The wide variety of the target materials was one of the features of the programme.

3) Member organizations of the Rescue Programme

The Rescue Programme was carried out by the Rescue Committee consisting of various organizations on cultural heritage which joined the programme in response to the request of the Agency for Cultural Affairs. The secretariat of the Rescue Committee, established at the National Research Institute for Cultural Properties, Tokyo, coordinated the dispatch of experts and supply of materials, and promoted the project in collaboration with the Boards of Education of the four affected prefectures and local municipalities.

The member organizations of the Rescue Committee are as follows:

National research institutes for cultural properties, national museums of art and other fields, societies for conservation of cultural property, nationwide associations of art museums, museums, archives, community-based volunteer groups for preserving local documents so-called networks for preserving historical materials, and the NDL. The wide variety of the member organizations to deal with various kinds of materials was also a feature of the programme.

4) Practice of the Rescue Programme

Each project to rescue materials has four steps:

1) Preliminary survey, 2) Salvaging damaged materials from the disaster site, 3) First-aid treatment, and 4) Storing them in an appropriate environment.

First-aid treatment was given in neighboring areas, and some materials were sent to institutions with special expertise located in remote areas. Basically, the secretariat of the Rescue Committee coordinated to form mixed teams composed of experts from various institutions, taking into consideration the expertise of the registered members, current situation of the related area, and condition of the target materials. Each rescue project was also implemented in collaboration with local organizations in the affected area.

The NDL, the hosting library of IFLA PAC regional center for Asia, joined the Rescue Programme in May 2011 at the request of the Agency of Cultural Affairs and participated in three rescue projects. Our staff members were involved in two on-site projects. One of them was a condition survey and the drafting of a restoration plan for the collection of 2,500 first-issue comic magazines under the leadership of experts from Tokyo National Museum. The other was support for stabilization treatment and a condition survey of old local documents under the leadership of Iwate Prefectural Museum. The rest was done at the Tokyo Main Library of the NDL. About 200 damaged items of a local collection originally owned by a village library were salvaged from the site, sent to Tokyo and given stabilization treatment such as washing and drying.

2 UNIQUENESS OF DISASTER RESPONSE IN LIBRARY COMMUNITIES: AN OPTION NOT TO RESCUE

5) Disaster response based on library cooperation

Looking back at the cooperation among library communities for recovery of the affected libraries after the Great East Japan Earthquake, it could be said that the usual procedure of library cooperation was effective even in an emergency. In other words, prefectural libraries surveyed and grasped the situation of municipal libraries and supported them. When a prefectural library was not able to meet requests from a municipal one, it asked the NDL for support and the municipal library got support from the NDL through the prefectural library.

Besides the Rescue Programme, the NDL supported two first-aid treatment projects for damaged materials originally owned by municipal libraries in response to requests from Iwate Prefectural Library. Staff members of the NDL gave advice and technical support on how to sort and treat materials salvaged from the libraries destroyed by the tsunami. The projects were carried out by the prefectural library, in collaboration with the NDL, volunteers from neighboring libraries, museums, colleges and universities, and the Japan Library Association.

Unlike the methods used in the Rescue Programme, in these cases, they made a value judgment of damaged materials salvaged from the disaster site. The project teams sorted out local collections, priority items for municipal libraries first, then selected materials difficult to replace by buying copies from elsewhere or receiving them as gifts. Furthermore, when it was confirmed that they were held by neighboring libraries, some titles were excluded from the target of first-aid treatment. Judgment based on the expertise of librarians narrowed down the items to be treated. Finally, the selected items received first-aid treatment such as drying, disinfection, and dry cleaning.

6) Selecting what to save: Decision making required for librarians

We learned that we had to select what to save when there was a huge quantity of damaged library materials. Unlike archives, documents, and museum materials that are usually irreplaceable, all library materials are not necessarily irreplaceable, and some of them can be replaced. The knowledge and experience of librarians was needed in evaluating the feasibility of such replacement. Separating replaceable items from irreplaceable ones in the process of rescue was a unique step in disaster response in the library community. It turned out that deciding what to save was a procedure characteristic of the library community, a process which does not exist in the disaster response in museum and art museum communities with which we collaborated for the first time in the Rescue Programme.

To identify priority materials in each library is of course one of the basic needs for disaster preparedness. In addition, we have learned that it is very important to establish a network with neighboring librarians and to share what each library holds for effective sorting when a disaster strikes.

3 A COLLABORATIVE NETWORK FOR DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

7) The fruits of the Rescue Programme for Cultural Properties

Now let us return to the Rescue Programme. During the two years from April 2011, based on the organizational framework of the Rescue Programme, more than ninety requests were handled collaboratively by experts in various institutions relating to preservation of cultural heritage such as museums, archives and conservation science laboratories.

The records of rescue activities have been accumulated and analyzed as basic data by the secretariat, and a database will be established by the secretariat in preparation for future disasters. Researchers at the National Research Institute for Cultural Properties, Tokyo, the secretariat, gathered and analyzed information on problems arising at the sites of treatment

for damaged materials, and carried out scientific research. They widely disseminated to persons concerned science-based information such as methods of washing and drying wet items, health hazards caused by toxic mold, and dangers to be noted in fumigation.

Through such research activities, meaningful information has been accumulated, which will be an important component of guidelines on how to treat seawater-damaged materials.

Although most of the target materials was salvaged from the disaster site, first-aid treatment and appropriate storage was not completed at all in the two years of the Rescue Programme. Since April 2013, the Board of Education in each prefecture has been responsible for the rescue work. Rescue projects are under way, making good use of reinforced local networks among persons related to preservation of cultural properties. Experts who had participated in the Rescue Programme are still giving support individually to each project concerned. Even though the formal organizational framework had ceased, the situation did not return to its former state before the Rescue Programme was implemented. The new bonds forged during these two years have been maintained, and activities for recovery of cultural properties are progressing little by little.

8) To establish a permanent organization to cope with emergency

Engaged in the Rescue Project, the Japanese cultural heritage community realized the importance of a cross-institutional and permanent organization like a national committee of the Blue Shield to cope with disasters. The experts realized that their institutions were not able to deal with emergency activities continuously without a reliable organizational base and proper funds even when a good collaborative network among cultural property experts existed.

In the last phase of the Rescue Programme, discussions were held on how to continue activities for recovery of cultural properties and about an organizational framework in preparation for future disasters. Although a new framework was not established by the end of the Rescue Programme, the participants raised and agreed on some immediate issues to address, including the following:

- 1) Communicating the experience of coping with this disaster to those who were not involved in the Rescue Programme, and raising public awareness about the importance of protection of cultural heritage from disasters.
- 2) Promoting cooperation networks during normal times in each field concerned with the preservation of cultural properties. In fields where a usual communication network had been established beforehand, it also worked effectively as an emergency communication network in rescue activities.
- 3) Promoting a grasp of cultural heritage to protect the identity of a particular local community in each area. Communities where the cultural properties to be protected had been registered in advance were more capable of responding to the disaster.

Although major challenges in establishing an organization to cope with disasters, such as where to locate the secretariat and how to receive funds steadily, were left undecided, it was greatly appreciated that so many professional institutions from a wide variety of fields

relating to preservation of cultural heritages became part of the network. The network brought each institution more partners to cooperate with in case of emergency than before. At the same time, each institution got ideas for promoting disaster preparedness in its own community from methods of preparedness in other fields. Promising to each other to maintain this newly-formed cross-institutional network for disaster preparedness in some form, the Rescue Programme ended on March 31, 2013.

As well as trying to maintain these cross-institutional bonds, the NDL as the IFLA PAC Regional Center for Asia is promoting the dissemination of information on disaster preparedness to domestic and international library communities, especially to Asian colleagues in countries located in earthquake zones.