Post-disaster tourism: building resilience through community-led approaches in the aftermath of the 2011 disasters in Japan

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ABSTRACT

Post-disaster tourism is often perceived as a form of Dark Tourism associated with death, loss and destruction. In Japan, the term Dark Tourism has gained prominence following the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami. This paper focuses on a community-led approach to post-disaster tourism development, initiated in the coastal area of Minamisanriku and labelled by the locals Blue Tourism. From its inception Blue Tourism incorporated non-dark activities which concentrated on the beauty of nature, social and environmental sustainability and the development of an enriched tourist experience. Its co-creational ethos helped transform some of the negative narratives of loss associated with Dark Tourism into positive accounts of communal renewal and hope. The paper highlights the limitations of Dark Tourism to post-disaster recovery and contributes new insights to the community-based tourism literature. We argue that Blue Tourism is not a type of Dark Tourism but a form of resilience which builds around local place-based practices and traditional community knowledge. Consequently, it is capable of achieving sustainable disaster recovery and tourist satisfaction simultaneously.AQ4

KEYWORDS Post-disaster tourism; Dark Tourism; service co-creation; community-based tourism; post-disaster recovery; Japan

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Introduction

On 11 March 2011, the largest ever earthquake and tsunami hit the North-eastern areas of Japan. The earthquake had a magnitude of 9.0 and the tsunami waves reached heights of up to 40.5 m. The damage to human life and infrastructure was enormous. The ensuing nuclear crisis from Fukushima added further challenges. In the aftermath of the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami, Japan witnessed an increased fascination with Dark Tourism, which was stimulated, among others, by visitors' pilgrimages to landmark disaster sites in Tsunami-hit areas (e.g. the lone survival pine tree in Rikuzentakata; The Disaster Prevention Centre in Minamisanriku), the launch in 2015 of new magazine entitled *Dark Tourism Japan* and the plan to turn the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant into a future Dark Tourism site (Demetriou, 2015; Japan Today, 2013). Japan's preoccupation with Dark Tourism dates back to events from the Second World War such as the atomic bombings of Hiroshima (e.g. A-Bomb Dome, The Peace Memorial Museum, and The Peace Memorial Park) and Nagasaki (e.g. the Atomic Bomb Museum). This paper highlights the limitations of employing a Dark Tourism framework to contemporary post-disaster tourism in Japan by contributing a more nuanced understanding of the role of community-based tourism (CBT) initiatives in enhancing resilience and pursuing a more sustainable form of tourism in post-disaster areas.

Blue Tourism is a community-led transformative tourism initiative launched in the coastal area of Minamisanriku, Japan in the aftermath of the 2011 tsunami. The philosophy and practices that underpin this initiative offer a blueprint for tourism development in other areas impacted by natural and political disasters. Traditionally, in the tourism lifecycle of disaster hit areas, tourism development is often seen as an unplanned consequence of a disaster and conceived in terms of Dark Tourism with all the negative connotations this brings. Unlike Dark Tourism, Blue Tourism is not a label coined by academics. Rather, this name is the brainchild of a group of Japanese fishermen and residents of Minami-

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sanriku, Japan. Taking inspiration from the colour of the crystalline waters surrounding this coastal destination, the label Blue Tourism captures the ambition of the community to counteract through tourism the environmental, social and economic hardship it faced after the 2011 disasters. Drawing on ethnographic participation at the site, this article provides insights into how the Blue Tourism project was established and the effects it had had on both tourists and local communities. The philosophy and practices underlying this community-led initiative add valuable insights to CBT while at the same time challenge some of the established conceptions of Dark Tourism in post-disaster areas.

Literature review

Dark Tourism

There is a fast growing literature on disaster tourism as a form of Dark Tourism (e.g. Tucker, Shelton, & Bae, 2017; Wright & Sharpley, 2016). Although, we suggest that Blue Tourism provides an alternative response to post-disaster tourism, it could be argued that it is still part of Dark Tourism due to its origins in a natural disaster that led to loss of life and the destruction of the physical environment. Therefore, it is important to shed light on the concept of Dark Tourism and its relation to post-disaster recovery. Dark Tourism was adopted by Foley and Lennon (1996a, 1996b) as a means to define death-related tourist activities. The term entered mainstream academia only in recent decades and remains a controversial term in terms of its definition, existing typologies and the methods by which it is studied. However, there is nothing essentially or inherently "dark": rather, darkness is interpreted in different ways by different people in different contexts. Nevertheless, Foley and Lennon (1996b, p. 198) suggest that Dark Tourism describes a "phenomenon which encompasses the presentation and consumption (by visitors) of real and commodified death and disaster sites". Stone's (2006, p. 146) influential work on the Dark Tourism spectrum, defines Dark Tourism as "…the act of travel to sites associated with death, suffering…", and as a physical space that links death with the living where the visitor can "construct meanings of morality" (Stone, 2012, p. 1565). However, Stone's influential spectrum of Dark Tourism does not include natural disaster sites.

The term Dark Tourism is generally characterized by both chronological continuation (from past to present) and space transcendence (from a physical to reflexive mediation spaces). When the dead and living are interpreted as past and present (Tarlow, 2005), visitation to the site where historically extraordinary tragedies and death have occurred becomes a way to build up dialogue with the past, remember it and reflect on its continuous impact on present lives (Knusden, 2011). From the space transcendence perspective, Dark Tourism is not only about physical space involvements, but also "…revolves around mortality narratives, education, entertainment, and memorialization and moral instruction" (Stone, 2012, p. 1582). Many definitions bring into focus the characteristics of the sites and the visitors' presence there (Magee & Gilmore, 2015; Sharpley, 2005), but the application of studies varies. For example, some studies on Dark Tourism focus on the characteristics of the site itself and on categories of dark site supply (Biran, Poria, & Oren, 2011; Magee & Gilmore, 2015; Powell & Iankova, 2016; Stone, 2006) while others bring to the fore typologies of Dark Tourism such as warfare tourism (e.g. Fallon & Robinson, 2016) and slave heritage tourism (e.g. Mowatt & Chancellor, 2011).

The intensity of darkness also depends on the period of time elapsed between the disaster and the visitation. For example, Minamisanriku might have been experienced as darker in 2011 on the Dark Tourism spectrum or shades of darkness (Sharpley, 2009; Stone, 2006) compared to now. One of the key factors that enabled Blue Tourism to develop and flourish in Minamisanriku was the ability of the community to respond quickly and sensitively to the dynamics of the site in ways that met local needs as well as those of the visitors.

For example, Blue Tourism incorporated from the beginning various aspects of leisure and education. By focusing on these more positive aspects it was possible to set a tone that encouraged interaction, transformation and co-creation of services with the visitors. It encouraged a mixture of commercialization and commemoration, creating a liminal space at the intersection between death and living while simultaneously enabling local communities to explore alternative income streams. For the people of Minamisanriku, this was of particular importance as their traditional industries of agriculture and fishing had been largely destroyed by the 2011 disasters. In this sense, Blue Tourism draws on Dark Tourism's abilities to combine dark emotion and leisure activities but its approach to post-disaster tourism transcends the opportunities offered by Dark Tourism.

Post-disaster tourism

The connection between disaster tourism and Dark Tourism remains a Gordian Knot in the literature. While some researchers claim that disaster tourism can be conflated with Dark Tourism (Tucker, Shelton, & Bae, 2017), others question the appropriateness of labelling disaster tourism as Dark Tourism in the first place (Bowman & Pezzullo, 2010; Rojek, 1997; Wright & Sharpley, 2016). Nevertheless, in Japan Dark Tourism debates have intensified after the 2011 disasters, in particular with the launch of the Fukuichi Kanko Project which aims to turn the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Plant into a future Dark Tourism site. Dark Tourism proponent Ide (2014, p. 6) goes as far as claiming that "Japan is suitable for Dark Tourism".

The motivation to visit dark sites has been well researched and remains central to understanding the relation between disaster tourism and Dark Tourism. While the fascination with death is emphasized by Stone and Sharpley (2008) as a main motive, Biran et al (2011) suggest the tourist motives are varied, similar to those for visiting non-dark sites, and are mainly driven by educational or emotional interests. Key motivations for Dark Tourism were summarized by Kang et al. (2012) in their research on the Jeju Peace Park, Korea, to include personal learning and obligation; social reason; curiosity and general education programme. The curiosity to see the outcome of natural disaster is also one of the motivations to visit disaster sites (Rittichainuwat, 2006; Yan et al., 2016).

In a nutshell, the literature suggests a wide array of motivations to visit disaster-related sites while disaster tourism as not necessarily being experienced as "dark". "By labelling certain tourist sites 'dark', an implicit claim is made that there is something disturbing, troubling, suspicious, weird, morbid or perverse about them…" (Bowman & Pezzullo, 2010, p. 190). Wright and Sharpley (2016) question the conflation of disaster tourism with Dark Tourism by pointing out four fundamental differences: its temporary nature, its unmanaged approach, variety of purpose and disaster tourists' gaze on the local community. This resonates with Rojek's (1997) views that post-disaster products are temporary and once debris is removed and the reconstruction is complete, site attributes would be very different from dark sites. Within the context of Japan, Suzuki (2016, p. 358) argues that "Dark Tourism is not the only option" to label post-disaster tourism, proposing the alternative term of "reconstruction tourism", which supports an earlier suggestion by Omori (2012). It is clear that Dark Tourism does not account for the affective relationship to the place of those visitors who repeatedly visit the site in order to support local community recovery nor does it capture the dynamics of the site and the ways in which it is changing to meet the needs and desires of the local communities as well as those of the visitors.

Building resilience through CBT

While most studies focus on visitors' motivation to visit the sites, we have fewer insights into how the local community reacts to their visits. Yet, such insights are essential to reduce any potential conflict between tourists and local communities. In a recent article focusing on the L'Aquila earthquake region in Italy, Wright and Sharpley (2016) highlight the importance of understanding changes in the local community's perceptions of disaster tourism and suggest ways of reducing negative perceptions via effective tourist management. This enhanced relationship between tourists and the community can also contribute to more effective disaster recovery processes, as suggested by Stylidis et al. (2014). Similarly, research conducted in South Australia on local community perceptions of Dark Tourism found that the residents' reaction towards dark tourists was negative (Kim & Butler, 2015). This negativity was the result of a lack of consultation and information surrounding the possibility of Dark Tourism becoming established in the area, which highlights the criticality of managing local expectations.

Despite such negative perceptions, some of aspects of Dark Tourism can be useful for disaster recovery if well managed. For example, Biran et al (2014) demonstrate that dark attributes that emerged from the Sichuan Earthquake can attract new tourist segments for destination recovery. Robinson and Jarvie (2008) examine Mercy Corps' efforts to revitalize post-disaster tourism in Arugan Bay after the 2004 tsunami in Sri Lanka and attribute its success to a well-planned strategy including community participation. Likewise, Poria, Reichel, and Biran (2006) emphasize the importance of managing heritage sites through understanding visitors' motivation and expectations of sites while Coats and Ferguson's (2013, p. 32) research on residents' perception of Dark Tourism in the post-earthquake Christchurch provides useful insights for balancing the tension of "being the subject of tourists gazing" and the need for tourists for social economic recovery.

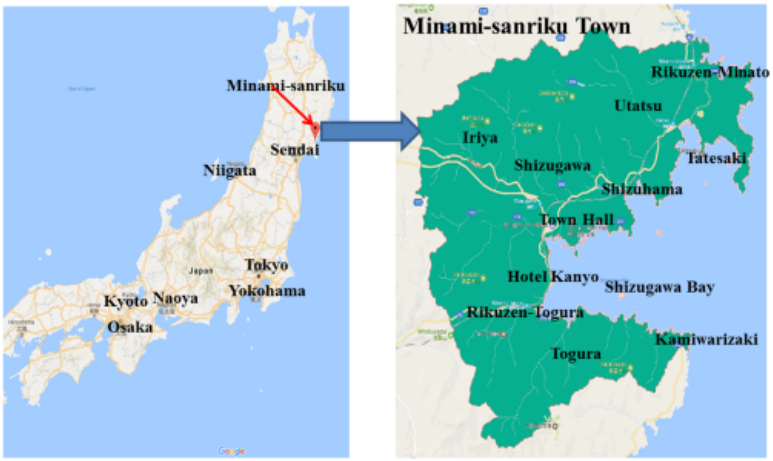
We argue that if post-disaster tourism services are initiated and managed by the local community, this tension could be minimized or even removed. Blue Tourism is a case in point being one of the many community-led initiatives taking place in the Tohuku area in Japan (Lin, Kelemen, & Kiyomiya, 2017). Research by Goulding, Kelemen, and Kiyomiya (2018) on community-based responses to the 2011 disasters in Minamisanriku provides useful insights into the social

and cultural dynamics of disaster resilience, while Kato (2018) argues that disaster resilience is closely related to how communities interact with the physical place over a long period of time and to the traditional ecological knowledge transmitted from generation to generation through personal stories, folklore, monuments and arts. Understanding how traditional place-based practices and community knowledge influence tourism development in post-disaster areas is crucial to building disaster resilience and sustainable tourism. With a few notable exceptions (e.g. Ghaderi, Mat Som, & Henderson, 2015; Lew, 2014; Lew & Cheer, 2017), tourism scholars have been slow in providing new theoretical perspectives on community resilience or in proposing practical solutions and approaches to post-disaster tourism (an exception being Calgaro, Lloyd, & Dominey-Howes, 2014).

Study context

To assess the scope and significance of the Blue Tourism initiative, it is important to explore the context in which it was established. While the 2011 Tsunami caused problems in numerous locations, our focus is upon the communities of Minamisanriku, a coastal town in the north-east of Japan, which was severely affected by the disasters (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Maps of Minamisanriku and surroundings adapted by author from Google map.



Coastal tourism is a growing area of interest given its specific place-based characteristics (Meyer-Arendt and Lew, 2016). Recent research has shed light on how coastal communities can diversify away from just the tourism economy by buying into the creative economy (Romero-Padilla, Navarro-Jurado & Malvárez-García, 2016). The population of Minamisanriku is about 13,571 inhabitants making it a relatively small town located in the north of the Miyagi prefecture. Its industries include fishing, seafood processing and aquaculture. In 2011, this picturesque town was swept away by the tsunami which claimed 832 lives (620 death, 212 missing), destroyed 3321 buildings and damaged another 178 buildings (Minamisanriku town official website, 2016). Many industry related infrastructures including shipping, fishing harbours, fishery processing factories, aquafarming facilities and equipment were destroyed. In addition, the numbers of tourists dropped sharply by over 60% from 1,083,630 in 2010 to 359,027 in 2011. Though the number of tourists had recovered to 80% of the pre-disaster level by 2015, the town is yet to recover fully (Minamisanriku town official website, 2016). Most tourists both pre- and post-disaster are domestic.

It is against this background that in 2013, a local fisherman and his community fellows set up the Blue Tourism initiative. With the support of the Minamisanriku Tourism Association, various seasonal activities were marketed as a distinct tourism offer grounded in narratives of renewal and hope and building upon the idea of service co-creation.

Methodology

Our study is underpinned by the interpretivist research paradigm (Bryman, 2016) and adopts a qualitative methodology with the view to decipher the meanings individuals attach to their actions within this particular context. Interpretivist studies hold the premise that there is no ultimate truth and no direct causality between social phenomena. Instead, the emphasis is on the complex processes by which individuals and collectivities construct, negotiate, challenge

and enact their lived culture. This approach is ideal for capturing the complexity of post-disaster recovery (Lin, Kelemen, & Kiyomiya, 2017). Our qualitative research focuses on collecting and orchestrating the narratives of those involved in the Blue Tourism initiative in the aftermath of the 2011 disasters in Japan. We have conducted semi-structured interviews, participant observation and analysed various written and visual documents. This combination of methods and sources of data, typically referred to as triangulation ensured "rigour, breath, complexity, richness, and depth" (Flick, 2002, p. 229) to our study.

Data collection

The data collection took place in Minamisanriku, Japan between June and September 2016 and included interviews, participant observation, and the examination of written and visual records. Twenty-four interviews were carried out in Japanese by the first author who had previously lived and worked in Japan. The interviewees included: seven fishermen, three business owners, one farmer, one storyteller, one housewife, three tourists, one tourist guide, four students, one education guide, one member of a Parent and Teacher Association and one member of "Fisherman Japan". Their age ranged from 18 to 65 and the gender mix was balanced. The length of the interviews was between 30 and 90 minutes. The questions for tourists/students were open ended focusing on their on-site experience and its effects on their lives while the questions for the local people concentrated on their experiences of Minamisanriku before and after the tsunami, their aspirations for the future and the role played by tourism in the reconstruction of the town. They resulted in 200 pages of transcribed material subsequently translated by the first author in English. The interviews were carried out not with the view to discover an ultimate truth but as active interactions "leading to negotiated, contextually based results" (Fontana & Frey, 2003, p. 62).

Further data was gathered through participant observation. The first author carried out over 70 days of participant observation (of which 40 were facilitated by her volunteering activities). Most volunteering activities took place in the fishery, agricultural farm, temporary house as well as the local permanent residential area and included seafood sorting, processing, planting, town festival preparation, local small business and other local recovery projects. Her role alternated between outsider or insider (Kara, 2015) depending on the task at hand and the need to immediately document conversations and people's reactions. The process of switching roles between observing and participating is crucial in fieldwork for it helps the researcher to understand the salient matters defining any community and what it feels like to be "one of them". This positionality had a significant impact on how the Minamisanriku stories were collected, analysed and written up. At the end of each day, the first author made notes about the tours she participated in, people she met, places visited, conversations held, people's reactions and her own personal feelings. This resulted in over 1800 pages of written notes. A further reflexive field diary recorded the researcher's feelings and emotions. These have been key to reflecting on the wider context and the role played by power/language discourses in shaping up individual and collective stories.

Visual diaries consisting of over 1000 pictures taken during the course of the three months fieldwork complemented the narrative data. The use of photographs, described by Prosser (1998, p. 1) as "signifiers of a culture", helps the reader to understand the community under the study in a more visceral way through being exposed to the colour, form and shape of the material and social culture of a place not just by reading about it. Photographs were also used in the interviewing process as a way to elicit stories about issues that may have been perceived as sensitive.

Information was also collected from the webpage of Blue Tourism Project, government official reports, social media and visitors books. These documents were not treated as neutral texts which simply mirrored an out there reality but as socially constructed accounts reflecting the power and social structure of the community in which they have been produced and consumed.

Data analysis

Narrative analysis (McIntosh, 2010) was applied to the entire corpus of the data collected. The visual data were also analysed narratively in terms of the stories it conveyed. Our interpretive stance concurs with Bagnoli (2009) who does not see visual data as an add-on to text-based analysis but as contributing to all stages of the interpretative process. The analysis of the second-hand data was useful in triangulating the findings arising from the analysis of first hand data.

Triangulation was employed with regards to the methods of investigation and sources of data as well as for cross-checking findings to ensure their credibility (Bryman, 2016). Reflexivity was a key ingredient in the process of research in that the researcher constantly questioned the impact her presence had upon participants and how this might have affected her own interpretations and overall results of the study (Davies, 2008; Holland, 1999).

To identify the emerging themes, we first created a field text consisting of interview transcripts, field notes, pictures taken during the fieldwork and second-hand records (Sanjek, 1992). All three authors read the transcripts of the interviews and other materials independently, began coding the materials, compiling types of reconstruction practices and pinpointing recurrent themes related to the relationship between tourists and local community members. The authors then compared their initial interpretations and agreed on the main analytical categories.

Two major themes emerged (1) Community responses to post-disaster tourism in Minamisanriku: rejecting the Dark Tourism label (2) The Blue Tourism Initiative as offering transformative services via co-creation. Within the latter key theme, the fishermen's and visitors' on-site experiences are discussed to demonstrate how these on-site experiences were constantly shaped by the interactions between service providers and receivers and how Blue Tourism became a transformative and resilience building initiative.

Community responses to post-disaster tourism in minamisanriku: rejecting the dark tourism label

Tourists have always been attracted to Minamisanriku's cultural and environmental resources. After the Tsunami, the type and nature of the tourism temporarily shifted from a positive orientated cultural and environmental tourism to a more negatively oriented form of Dark Tourism. The Blue Tourism initiative reflected the desire of the local community for the region not to be defined solely by the disaster, but to be able to use the tsunami as a means to re-engage visitors with the beauty of the local culture and environment, in other words, to use the disaster as a positive force to shape the future. As such, although initially rooted in Dark Tourism, Blue Tourism quickly became a form of post-disaster tourism led by the community with the aim to build disaster resilience via a form of sustainable tourism. While it was underpinned by optimism from its inception, the offering still included within its itinerary traditional Dark Tourism components such as tsunami-ravaged schools, collapsed hospitals and flattened seawalls. These Dark Tourism components were seen as useful for achieving a heightened effect for disaster education and for intensifying visitors' emotional experience. A poignant example is the former Disaster Prevention Centre (Figure 2), where many employees lost their lives while attempting to coordinate the rescue operation during the tsunami. This building has become an important memorial icon that features on most tours of the site. Yet, it triggers ambivalent emotions regarding whether it should be demolished or kept as a memorial to the dead.

Figure 2. The former Disaster Prevention Centre. Source: http://www.bo-sai.co.jp/minamisanrikusinsai.html Yamamura, 2011.

One of the interviewee pointed at the picture of the building (Figure 2) and commented:

> My son was there on the rooftop of the building. He was lucky to survive, but my parents were not that lucky, they both died in the Shizugawa hospital, which is not far from this building. It is sad to see the

> building but it is an important monument to remind us of the disaster and we should never forget it. (Interview 21, Local survival, Housewife)

Other local people said:

> The story of the young employee Miki Endo (□□□□), who sacrificed her life by remaining at her post and broadcasting tsunami warnings over the loudspeaker system, has been written into the school text books. It is necessary to retain this site for educational purposes to highlight their sacrifice, the sense of responsibility of our civil servants who lost their lives here for us. However, in the long run, we cannot immerse ourselves in this disaster image; we need to move on and educate our young generation how to live with our nature sustainably (Interview 22, local elder resident, shop owner).

> I became a volunteer story-teller as I do not want people to forget our tragedy. Our town mayor is also one of the survivors from this building. I understand the sufferings and painful memory of those who lost their family members here. It might not be in harmony with the reconstruction of the new town, but this is an important site fir sharing the disaster experience and building an emotional connection with the younger generation. I want to pass down the lessons learned from this tragedy to young people but also show them how people work to rebuild their lives after the disaster and the progress we made, such as the forest management certification from the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and the Certification from Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC) and our Biomass Plant (Interview 24, Volunteer Story-teller).

The community's response towards this dark site is ambivalent; some argued that it should remain as a place of significance, for passing down disaster experiences and creating a succession of memories and records for future generation while others argued that it would be painful for the victims' families to see it and incompatible with the reconstruction of the new town. Although, Minamisanriku clearly possesses all of the necessary components for it to be defined as a Dark Tourism destination, it was felt by residents that they did not want their town to be solely associated with death and disaster as commented by a local resident:

> I spend my entire life here. I am lucky to live in a town with both beautiful mountains and sea. I feel uncomfortable to see this skeleton building; it is like a scar. We used to have quite a lot of Ryokan (Japanese inns) in the town and people came here on holiday. The town was severely destroyed by the tsunami but the nature has its own power to recover along with human recovery efforts. I want our beautiful town back and I want people back to see the beauty of the town, not just to sympathize with the destruction. I want them to come here to taste our seafood (e.g. hotate, hoya, unidon, tako) and experience the richness of nature, culture and history (Interview 23, Local Farmer).

Resistance to the label of Dark Tourism among the Minamisanriku community members is also found in a presentation entitled "Memory from 3.11" given by a hotel owner at the Tohoku Tourism Advisor Meeting on 22 January 2016, which maps out "a strategy for exploring the tourism image in Minamisanriku, but NOT as Dark Tourism" (Japan Reconstruction Agency, 2016). Although inclusive of Dark Tourism sites, Blue Tourism is a post-disaster form of tourism that empowers the community to build a sustainable form of tourism which builds around ideas of service co-creation and the importance of on-site experiences and interactions between tourists and locals.

The blue tourism initiative as a provider of transformative services via co-creation

Blue Tourism differs greatly from many other disaster orientated tourism initiatives in that the interactions between visitors and locals play a central role in co-creating the tourism experience. The motivations for establishing the Blue Tourism initiative was triggered by remarks made by the volunteers who came to clean beach debris and do fishery work in 2012. The visitors talked about a deep affection and appreciation of the beauty of nature and fishery experience after being offered a boat tour by a local fisherman as a thank token for the help they had provided to him and the local community. According to the fisherman who was the brainchild of Blue Tourism:

> That was the turning point when I saw the volunteers were extremely pleased with my guided boat tour on the sea. It occurred to me that it would be a great idea if I could provide boat tours as I have less fishery business after the devastating tsunami. More and more visitors told me that they were extremely pleased with the boat tour and suggested that I should expand my fishery work to tourism as I have got some flexible time as a fisherman and am capable of guiding the marine tour. (Interview1, Fisherman)

He explained that even the decision for calling the initiative Blue Tourism was made in consultation with the volunteers/visitors. They also played a central role in how the offer was shaped and managed. As interviewee 1 continued:

> I was not sure what I should include in the program. When I first started, it was more like an experimental project, a bit of "learning by experiencing". I was not sure what would be expected by the visitors. I took everything for granted such as the sea experience, the boat trip, and I did not know what would make the tour more joyful. I gradually I understood more and more via my observation and interaction with the visitors during the boat tours, fishery service, and volunteering activities. During the tour they showed me what they liked or disliked. Their joyful reaction to the sea experience and their positive feedback encouraged me to continue to explore and improve (Interview 1, Fisherman)

As such, Blue Tourism activities were developed by incorporating both fishermen's and visitors' on-site experiences and what the site had to offer. The ethos behind Blue Tourism ensured that the visitors were engaged in a high degree of non-dark experiences at site. The site as a tourism-scape allowed the visitors and service providers to interact and co-create a space for learning, experiencing, understanding and transformation from negative feelings to positive ones (Figure 3). The site experiences were constantly shaped by the interaction between service providers and services receivers.

Figure 3. The Blue Tourism.

Visitors' on-site experience

One of the major themes that emerged from the research project is that within Blue Tourism the effective co-creation of experiences was the direct result of the blurring of boundaries between the categorization of visitors, whereby participants may begin as tourists, but then go on to become volunteers or even become permanent residents. Additionally, there is no clear demographic profile or typology of tourists, with participants/visitors being drawn from a diversified social background including students, employees, retired couples, fishing fans, etc. (mostly based in Japan). Their initial motivations may have been underpinned by the desire to visit a Dark Tourism site for purposes of "…learning, family bonding, meaningfulness, and comfort from achieving internal obligation" (Kang et al., 2012, p. 262). However, our research demonstrates that Blue Tourism created a positive interaction between the visitors/tourists and the local community as service providers. Consequently, visitors become interactive participants within the project, sharing experiences, stories and taking positive supportive actions; in short one could witness a transformative healing process which helped to build disaster resilience via a bottom-up, sustainable form of tourism. One of the major factors influencing the successes of Blue Tourism was the environmental characteristics of Minamisanriku in combination with access to the fishermen's daily work. These factors were critical to both visitors' experience and the development of emotional ties with the local community. As one family who were visiting from Tokyo commented:

> The fishing experience is fantastic. The blue sea makes me feel so relaxed and I forget the trouble of my work. I also want my son to learn the power and beauty of nature. I really appreciate the fisherman's story which is so inspiring and the seafood is so delicious. I did not expect to gain so much…a really meaningful day out (Interview25, Visitor from Tokyo)

Arguably, the physical characteristics of the environment promote cathartic tourist experiences and responses, and supports Jepson and Sharpley's (2015) view that nature and countryside can be recognized as sources of spiritual or emotional fulfilment and connection or even "spiritual renewal" (Harrison, 1991, p. 21). Consequently, the physical environmental characteristics of Minamisanriku as a coastal destination provide the backdrop that supports the healing and regeneration of communities more effectively than one which is not imbued with such natural and aesthetic resources.

The interaction between visitors and the environment were also enhanced by Blue Tourism service providers who mediated educational and learning opportunities for visitors. Although, Dark Tourism sites are frequently visited for learning purposes (e.g. Biran et al., 2011), Blue Tourism incorporates a learning experience that does not solely focus on the disaster, but also on environmental and sustainable debates and initiatives. The research clearly demonstrated how learning was enhanced through the interactions and mediation offered and managed by Blue Tourism staff. Their focus on sustainability and the environmental education is reflected in comments provided by one of the Blue Tourism education guides:

> …by encountering nature, experiencing the beauty of nature and listening to the fisherman's stories, my students will have a better understanding as to why they should protect the environment which will increase their sense of responsibility and motivation for learning about marine knowledge. (Interview 8, Education Guide)

This sentiment is also reflected by students from cities such as Tokyo and Osaka who commented that:

> I learnt much more from the actual site than that from any book regarding the disaster learning and marine knowledge. (Interview 9, University Student)
>
> I was deeply inspired by the power of the human spirit, though I came for experiencing the power of nature… (Interview 10, University Student)
>
> I am studying the subject of environment and sustainability. This was a really good learning experience and the real-life case here really made me think about the issue of sustainability and co-existence of human and nature (Interview 11, University Student)
>
> What surprised me are the concepts of simplicity of life and freshness of the seafood. We used the shell as a plate to eat the seafood at the fishermen's farm. The seafood we tasted was just out of the sea. The concepts of freshness, beauty and simplicity should be put into the study of food design. (Interview 13, Food Design and Nutrition Student)

For student groups, there are often intended learning outcome set by their organizers, but their on-site involvement provides a more enhanced and complex learning experience. The experience is heightened through their on-site interaction with both the environment and Blue Tourism representatives. These interactions enable the students to analyse the nature of the disaster and see beyond the morbid fascination that underpins many Dark Tourism experiences, by witnessing how tourism can become a transformative service.

Other local educational trips for primary school children also point to the benefits of this type of tour as reflected by the head of the PTA (Parents and Teachers Association):

> As many children' parents are fishermen, it is good for the kids to understand their parents' profession and enhance their affection for their town. The boat trip enhances their learning on marine knowledge, fish categories, beach debris cleaning, rubbish classification and environmental protection (Interview14, Head of the PTA).

Apart from cognitive learning, the emotional impact of interactions mediated by the Blue Tourism initiative is found to be critical in transforming the visitors' experiences and perceptions of the site from negative to positive. Many of the visitors' perceptions and initial interpretations of Minamisanriku had been formed prior to their visit, being very much supported by Kang et al. (2012) assertions that experience is influenced by many factors such as interpretation, site authenticity and media coverage.

These were subsequently transformed as a direct result of the interactions between visitors and local people. For many visitors the warmth of the local people, the hardship of their life and their optimistic spirit generated emotional links. This is clearly evidenced in several interviews and is eloquently reflected in the comments of one visitor, who stated that:

> Though I had no connection with the local victims I felt a closer connection with them after I visited the place, talked with them and experienced their lives. I felt a sense of duty to help, so I kept coming back here whenever I could and became a regular volunteer here. (Interview 15, Visitor from Tokyo)

These emotional experiences led to repeated visits and to transformational experiences for both visitors and the local community. From an analysis of the visitors' book, these repeat visits were motivated by empathy, the recognition of

the hardship of life post-tsunami and an admiration of the spirit of the survivors all of which materialized into support through volunteering and active participation in the Blue Tourism initiative. The transformational nature of Blue Tourism is not limited to the local community, but is a life affirming and sometimes metaphysical tourist experience reflected in the comments of one visitor who states that:

> I came here to commemorate the victims and I wanted to help, but ended up benefiting myself from these encounters with the locals. Their spirits and attitude to life greatly inspired me and changed my own attitude to life. (Interview 16, Visitor)

Such meaningful and positive sentiments also dominate the comments section of the visitors' book that was held in the fish farm. These positive comments in conjunction with the responses provided in interviews, suggest that Blue Tourism produces transformational responses that are predominantly positive and almost at odds with the morbid connotations of Dark Tourism. Although tourists' motivations for visiting Dark Tourism sites may be to engage in non-dark experiences (see Biran et al., 2011, 2014; Smith & Croy, 2005) they often lack the opportunity for tourists to co-create transformational experiences, as it is not always possible to interact with those directly affected by the disaster. Although it is clear that Blue Tourism has had many positive impacts upon tourists/visitors, the biggest impact of the project has been on the lives and lived experiences of the local community, specifically, the fishermen.

Fishermen's on-site experiences

One of the most significant aspects of the research was charting how the fishermen's experiences of the tsunami have been transformed via the interaction at sites with visitors. This transformation was possible because the Blue Tourism project was not dominated by dark site attributes, but by a philosophy of change and transformation rooted in place-based practices and traditional knowledge. This alternative approach was motivated by the fishermen's recognition that government's reconstruction would be a long and slow process and that the immersion in the darkness of disaster and death would not make life any better, and therefore, there was a need to move on and take things in their own hands. This sentiment was reflected in the comments of a local fisherman whose fishery was destroyed in the tsunami:

> Someone had to make a start to pull thing together and bring life back on track and volunteers accelerated the start and inspired me to explore more and to want to provide better services. (Interview 3, Fisherman)

The fishermen's eagerness to make a change together with the volunteers' involvement served as push and pull factors to shift from the experience of a declining traditional fishery to Blue Tourism, as a signifier of change. As the interviews revealed, there is a need to move forward and find a more sustainable way of living. The local fishermen as insiders are well positioned to make the best of their own life situation and decide what can be offered to visitors in consultation with the latter. This process of co-creation has a transformative power that affects the economic, social and cultural structure of the site. The ability to diversify to a tourism and fishery-based economy opened many entrepreneurial opportunities for the fishermen, as one senior fisherman stated:

> We offer the services of the wakame seaweed harvest, scallop-catching tour, oyster tour, fishing trip, followed by the activities of tasting the sea food, and buying the sea food. These activities were soon developed as a package of services based on visitors' needs. Though our original purpose was to convey the greatness of nature and food while earning some living, the influence became far greater than that… (Interview 3, Senior Fisherman)

Financially, the ability to diversify into tourism provided a much-needed alternative form of income in a time when the sustainability of traditional income sources was fragile. Fishermen were in urgent need to find an outlet for their seafood products and the Blue Tourism helped generate income not only from the tours and but also from the consumption of sea foods. As another fisherman stated:

> Due to the nuclear contamination issue, people are worried about the seafood safety issues even though the tests show our seafood is safe. Korea refused to import our seafood. Blue Tourism increased the sale of the seafood and the number of visitors (Interview 5, Fisherman)

Thus, the services offered by the fishermen have been perceived as positive tourism encounters, leading to a growth in the demand for their services. This increased demand for such services stimulated supply. The fishermen's coping

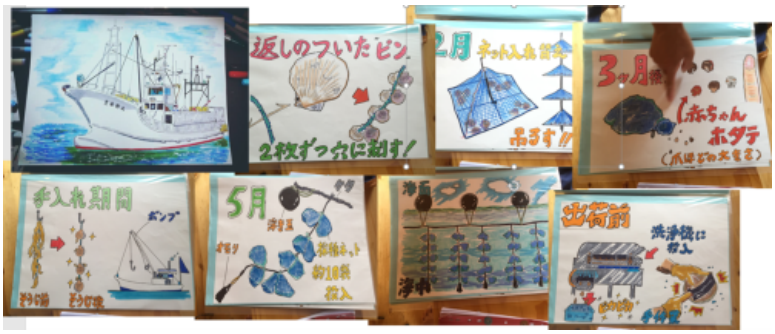
strategy was to cooperate with other members of the community to achieve mutual benefits as described by a restaurant owner, a hostel owner and fisherman:

> We created a seasonal menu based on the seasonal seafood from fishermen that could convey to the visitors the best taste of our seafood and the greatness of the sea. We have a shared vision that this is more than individual economic benefit: it is also good for the recovery of the community as a whole (Interview 17, Restaurant Owner)

> There are sets of products combining the seafood produced by the fishermen and my cake business both on-line and in the shop in my hostel, which gives the visitors a variety of choices for souvenirs. We also provide a package service combining the fishing tour, accommodation and food in my hostel based on the tourists needs (Interview 18, Hostel Owner).

The above examples illustrate how Blue Tourism has created an esprit de corps in which the disaster has strengthened local ties and created new financial opportunities. Consequently, the line between the commemoration and commercialization has been blurred and the transition from sadness to the positive acceptance of reality has spurred the efforts for recovery. Visitors might come for commemorating the victims and secondarily consume the products as a way of supporting the community recovery. While the ethics of "consuming Dark Tourism" (Stone and Sharpley, 2008, p. 590) are seen controversial by some, Blue Tourism ensures that commemoration and commercialization co-exist side by side and synergize each other. Significantly, however, from a social perspective, Blue Tourism is more than just a means to provide a financial and economic impact; rather its real value lies in its transformational impact on the wellbeing of human beings (both visitors and fishermen). The fishermen's transformative experience through the interaction with visitors in Blue Tourism initiative is reflected on by one fisherman in both narrative and visual ways (Figure 4):

Figure 4. Pictures drawn by the fisherman.



> I returned to the town from Sendai and became a fisherman after disaster. I gradually started to love my work especially after I met a lot of visitors and joined the Blue Tourism project in which I can use my skills of drawing the pictures such as scallop, oysters and wakame to illustrate the process of aquaculture to visitors during the tour and they love my pictures, which is a big part of the beauty of my work. I became more optimistic about marine jobs and the recovery of my town (Interview 5, Young Fisherman).

These drawings reflect the fisherman's attachment to the sea, his boat, and his pride in the profession. It is clear from the data that Blue Tourism has transformed the fishermen's experiences and the image of their own community. The post-disaster image of the fishing town used to be very depressing, being dominated by scarcity of population and lack of vitality, all of which form the basis for the development of Dark Tourism. However, by focusing on positive site attributes such as the beauty of nature, cultural interactions between hosts and guests and the provision of local foods, it was possible to create more positive perceptions of place (Seaton, 1999; Stone, 2006) and enhance the destination's sustainable recovery (Sofield, Guia, & Specht, 2017). This process was described by a team member of the Blue Tourism initiative in the following terms:

> Most visitors are students, they are young and enthusiastic. They bring the town vitality, help us reconstruct the economy, but also bring us (fishermen) together. Sometimes the tour can be large: for example, 100 students came at the same time but our fishing boat can only accommodate 10 people at a time, so we needed

> to cooperate with each other to find the best way to please the visitors; some groups departed for the sea tour while other groups learnt the marine knowledge at shore, then they swapped… (Interview 4, Fisherman)

This project has regenerated connections with the traditional civic society of fisherman and reinforced traditional community ties and a sense of belonging to the place. Building on place-based practices of fishing and cooking and on traditional knowledge about the sea, the community enhanced its own resilience (Kato, 2018) while at the same time pursuing a bottom up form of sustainable tourism. All of this has helped the fishermen reduce their experience of the darkness of the site, giving hope for a full recovery of the town. Their efforts have been acknowledged by Japan Tourism Agency (2015). Blue Tourism was granted the Tohoku Area Tourism Award for Outstanding Efforts for Supporting Youth Travel in 2015, as outlined below:

> The reasons for granting the award is because Blue Tourism was initiated by a group of fishermen who made great efforts to revive their town and engage with the young generation, to stop Japanese youth turn their back on fishing products, to utilize the local marine and other natural resources sustainably to develop seasonal tours and encourage youth travel to Minamisanriku. (Award Report from Japan Tourism Agency, 2015)

Blue Tourism has provided fishermen with an opportunity to explore through interactions with visitors their own identity and connections with the sea and the community. For some, being a fisherman was not an option, but an obligation whereby, the eldest son is expected to continue the family line and family profession. As the value of being a fisherman is reinforced via interactions with the visitors, the profession is becoming more attractive. A younger fisherman whose ambition was to be a doctor said:

> I had no plans at all to be a fisherman. I wanted to work in medicine as being a doctor was seen as very desirable. I returned to my hometown due to my physical condition. My house was washed away and I constantly helped my parents with some fishery work but only slightly got used to it. After engaging with a lot of other fishermen, I started to find enjoyment in the work. In addition, I met many volunteers who came here to help and in particular were involved in the Blue Tourism project. I was often told that 'the sea is beautiful, the food is delicious and fishermen are cool' so I started to love and be proud of my profession thanks to the visitors. (Interview 2, Fisherman)

The comments from other fishermen also show that their identity as fishermen was re-shaped via the interaction of service:

> I grew up here, I did not see fishing as a great job, and instead, I admired those IT men. They were cool… But then I saw the visitors' screaming out excitedly when experiencing the rough sea and various types of seaweeds. It is through the visitors' eyes that I now see the wonders of the sea and the meaning of my work as a fisherman has changed. Their satisfaction and smiling faces made me want to develop my fishing skills to show them in more depth the beauty of my hometown (Interview 5, Young Fisherman)

The joyfulness felt by many of the visitors, and their communication of these feelings to locals demonstrates that post-disaster sites can be experienced differently from merely being associated with death-related activities. Alternative discourses focusing on themes such as marine knowledge and sustainability gave fishermen the opportunity to share their experiences about their own profession in a positive manner, whilst also providing a platform to demonstrate their wide range of knowledge and skills. This transformative process led to a newfound pride in their profession.

The ensuing interactions with visitors enabled fishermen to reaffirm their sense of responsibility to the sea and the town. The visitors' perceptions of the environment and their responses to it strengthened fishermen's ambition to maintain the beauty of the sea and reasserted the need for sustainable development. The result was an enhanced sense of responsibility to educate younger generations by passing marine knowledge and culture down to them. This is demonstrated in the comments provided by one of members of Fishermen Japan, an organization that was established after the tsunami:

> I did not know the value of the sea before disaster; we learned the value of the sea from the visitors. Now I want to show everybody that being a fisherman is cool. (Interview 20, Member of Fisherman Japan)

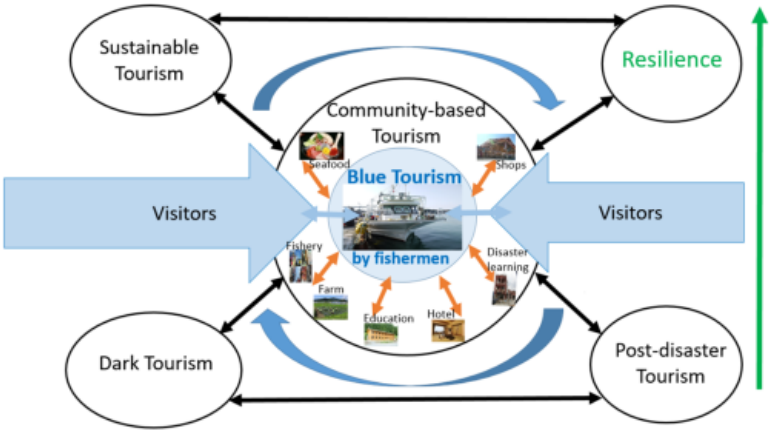
The Blue Tourism initiative made it possible for fishermen to pass on their knowledge and respect for the environment to wider audiences. Their current image is a far cry from the traditional image of the Minamisanriku fisherman: their

involvement with Blue Tourism helped create a shared identity of the fishery community and enhanced disaster resilience in Minamisanriku.

Conclusions

The themes of death, destruction and commemoration are interwoven parts of the Dark Tourism experience. While the Blue Tourism initiative includes visits to dark sites, this community-led initiative builds on place-based traditional practices and local community knowledge to co-create a sustainable form of tourism that seems at odds with it being defined or categorized as merely another example of Dark Tourism development in a post-disaster area. The impact of Blue Tourism on both visitors and the local community makes it clear that post-disaster sites can be experienced and enacted differently and provides a clear example of community resilience (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Co-creation process.



The interaction between actors at the site is an important element in transforming post-disaster visitors' experiences into positive and enduring relations with the place and its community by focusing on the beauty of nature, disaster learning and environmental sustainability. Such approaches positively enhance the wellbeing of both visitors and service providers, and lead to a gradual transformation from dark emotions associated with loss of human life and property to positive engagement with community reconstruction. During the intervening years since the 2011 Tsunami, the impact of the disaster has gradually faded from the memory of the visitors and, it could be argued, so has the interest and motivation for visiting the site as a Dark Tourism destination.

The launch of Blue Tourism with its focus on community, environment and education has created a long-term sustainable form of tourism that transcends the definition of Minamisanriku as merely a disaster site. Blue Tourism has brought vitality to the town, and its bottom-up community approach is less likely to create ethical issues for the locals as it is initiated by the local fishermen in cooperation with other community members. In this capacity, it can be seen as a good example of co-creativity/co-creation. Blue Tourism has enabled the creation of an image for the town that is progressive and sustainable, and in which both visitors and locals interact and "develop co-creative transformative service experiences" (Magee & Gilmore, 2015, p. 915), which in turn has positive effects on the improved physical, mental, social wellbeing of the community members and visitors. For visitors, the on-site involvement with fishermen provides a more enhanced and complex learning experience and emotional fulfilment than Dark Tourism could ever offer. For the fishermen, Blue Tourism generates an alternative way of income and brings hope for future development, while the interaction with visitors enables them to express and reshape their social and cultural identity in a positive manner. Thus, community-led tourism initiatives such as Blue Tourism highlight the limitations of Dark Tourism approaches to post-disaster sites, providing a valuable alternative for the development of a more sustainable form of tourism and of community resilience in post-disaster sites.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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